VOLUME: 1

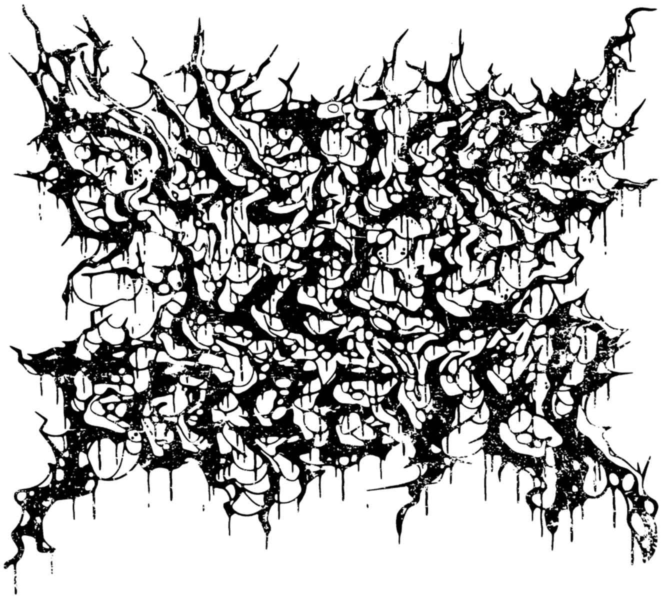
"The First Insult"

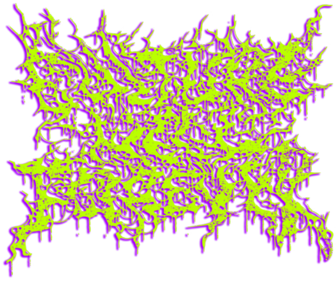
Orson Welles Lives!

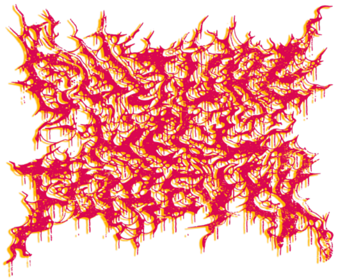
You'd be surprised how easy the sex is. I mean, my cock's huge, but she's cubic kilometers of cement. It wouldn't even mean anything for me to enter her. Thousands of strangers do every day. So I tell her how clean her bathrooms are, by Mexican public facility standards. That lubes her up a bit. Her website is so functional, her security team so responsive. I go for the kill: her screening is an equitative, timely process. It isn't and she's aware, which is why hearing it makes her spurt, and I do mean gallons. If you've ever got bideted at the border crossing, now you know.

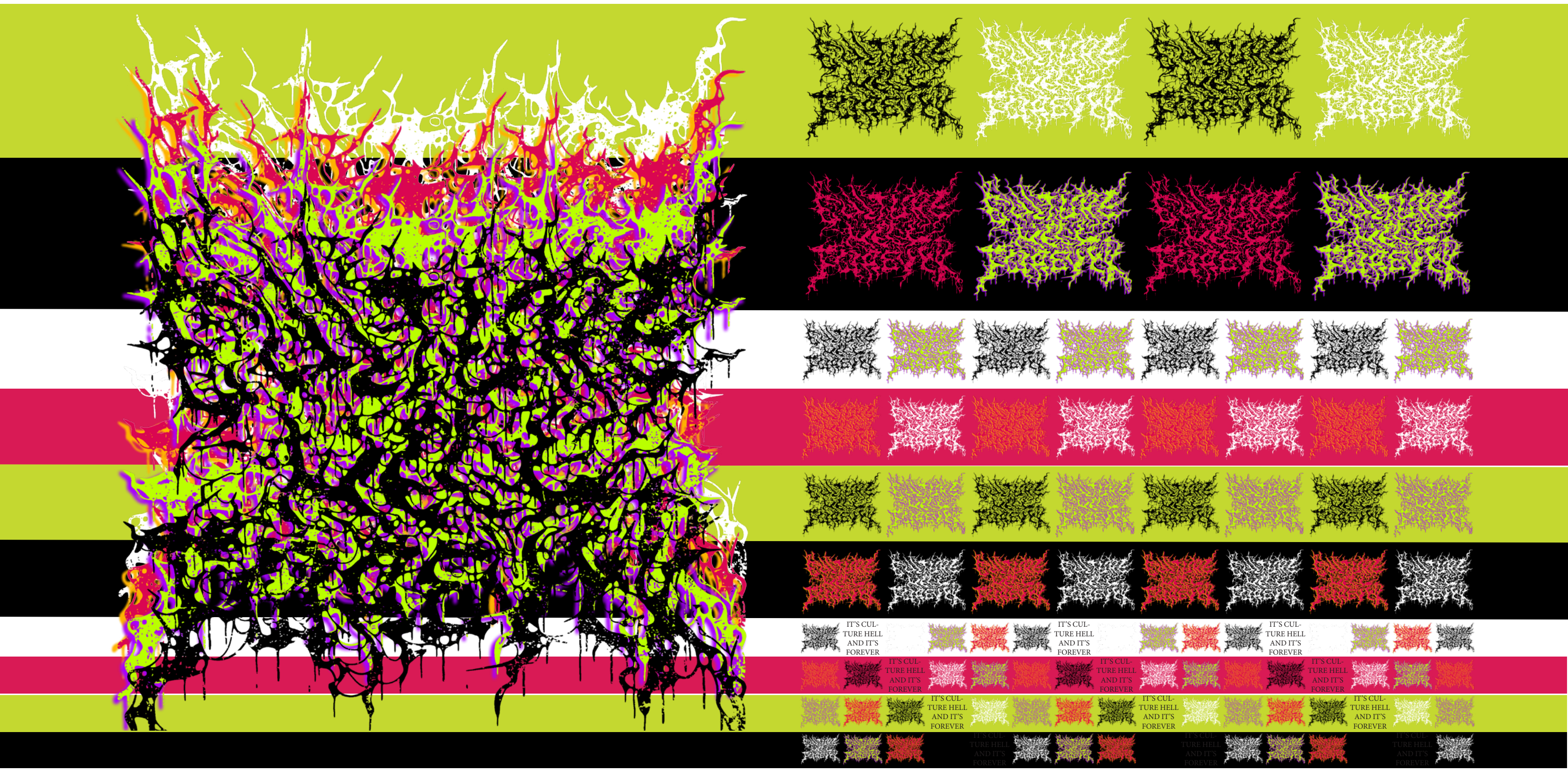
What's hard is romance. I can squeeze a quickie anywhere, but she's the world's busiest consulate. What do you do when you get an hour and half every week, if lucky? She likes movies about traveling. Eat Pray Love. It's not even like a comedy or anything. But I'll watch a Julia Roberts for my lady.

After two years of wait, last month she clears my visa. Goodbye tacos de asada, goodbye norteño, and goodbye my girlfriend, who is the United States consulate in Ciudad Juárez. The following is a magazine I resolved to edit in a fit of grief whilst crying over my last pan dulce, if not for the fact that it was actually a Starbucks pastry.








IT'S CULTURE HELL AND IT'S FOREVER

FROM THE EDITRESS // FROM THE EDITRESS // FROM

That's fine with me. I'm married.

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SYMPATHETIC SIGNAL PROJECTOR

by R.P.

on a day like any other in a war with no end in sight, a soldier must relay a message to a contact across Mare Nubium containing intelligence of critical importance to the war effort. the telephonic ground lines key to the coordination of local battlefronts cannot carry a message overseas, as the infrastructure does not extend to the far shore. owing to interference from frequent low-altitude gamma sprite discharges among the clouds above the sea, lineless telephonic projection is frequently impossible, and as a result most messages cannot be relayed until the weather is clear. in matters of import as immediate as these, an alternative method--little known among the soldiers--is employed: a sympathetic signal projector, or SSP.

it's a term the soldier feels like she has heard before. the name of a machine. she doesn't know why it isn't used often. she doesn't know what it is or how to use it. she only knows that she has been told she will have to use one, and where to find one.

the location is a shack half a mile into the woods off the main road between Mesoa and Tropos, shot through with bullet holes that let the pounding rain in. she has been sitting here, wet and cold, for half an hour. there is nothing here. she has been told to wait--that it will be brought to her. she does not understand how she will be able to operate the machine in these conditions.

a knock at the door.
"when are you coming home?"
a query.
"when the music's over."
a password.

the door opens. a man, hairless from head to toe, wearing only a heavy black rain cloak, slouches in the frame. hunched over, he seems in his posture to be at war with his body, never quite comfortable with the way he is standing.

"sssssorry i was late. we should get sssstarted without delay."
"where's the machine?"
he grins, and shrugs off the cloak.
"i ammmm the machine. you will have to learnnnn to use me quickly."

his torso is a frenzied mosaic of surgical scars and tattooed words, all leading to the centerpiece on display--a single great scar on his crotch where genitals would otherwise be. this man was once a prisoner of the enemy.

"it'ssss okay if you damage me a little. we can ffffix it. we just have to wwwwork fast."

he pauses, waiting for some kind of response. when she provides none, he turns from her and continues, speaking over his shoulder as he digs through his cloak pockets.

"i'm pretty ssssimple to use. touch the elektro-mmmmagnetic needles to the letterssss and hold them ffffor a second or so."

the letters he speaks of are tattooed on his back, on a square of flesh of a color conspicuously lighter than the rest of him. one of each letter of the Stratian alphabet, plus miscellaneous punctuation and diacritics, each symbol neatly contained in its own cell of a grid. at its edges, where the transplanted meat meets his original skin, the seam of flesh is a sickly yellow.

he turns. from the cloak he has retrieved two long and thick needles with slightly blunted tips like those used for knitting, sharp enough to hurt but perhaps not to harm without intending to, with insulated black rubber handles. a wire extends from each handle, connecting to a thin black box in the cloak pocket. a battery. she takes them, speechless at what she is witnessing.

"we don't have the luxury of time to wwwwaste."
"sorry, just...this is a lot to take in."

he smiles again, wider. a grin which seems to delight in her discomfort. with his face closer and clearer in view, corrective orthodontic wire is visible on his crooked teeth.

"yessss, i am quite an oddity. wwwwe can talk about it later."

"right."

a needle in each hand. the letters before her. the surface of the SSP rises and falls with shallow breaths, impatiently awaiting her input. still, she hesitates. he coughs. hesitation cannot last; she must act.

gingerly, she touches a needle to a letter. O.

"i apprrrreciate your concern for my comfort, but you shhhhould use a little more force. it makes the sssignal clearer."

grimacing, she proceeds to the next, pressing the needle harder into the key for the letter P.

"ah! ahhhhehehe."

not entirely the reaction she was expecting. giggling, he buries his face in his hands, seeming quite amused with her clumsy typing. she enters a third character. E.

"a bit b-better. but still sssslow!"
"do you always share this much critique with your operator, machine?"
"oh, uuuusually. i--EEP!"

a fourth. R. she is faster, and jabs harder. the more forceful she is, the more he laughs to himself. A.

"operattttion? operative, mmmmaybe? heeheeh-EE!"

T. he was right the first time. the word is operation. I.

it was imperceptible to her at first, but after this many letters she can detect it. the needles emit a low elektro-harmonic hum, which shifts to a quiet high-pitched whine when they come in contact with the keys. O.

the needles are not the only thing whining. little noises escape the machine, gasps and prolonged squeaks each time the current is completed. it seems to respond well to force. N.

"therrrre's a key for an empty sssspace at the bottom right."

"yes, I see it. thank you."

keying in a space, she takes a deep breath. all of that was one word. she's nowhere near finished.

"am I holding the keys too long? you're right, we don't have time to waste."
"perhapssss a bit. you'll figure it out as you go. i've beennnn told i give useful physical feedback. eheheeee."

an I. he's right. there is the tiniest shudder, a slight jerk in his posture, that indicates when the transmission is complete. it takes a little bit less than a second. N.

"just sssso you know--ah!"
another space.
"p-prrrressing a little harder sometimessss completes the transmission faster."
"sometimes?"

C. she digs the needle in, and he jolts in response nearly immediately.
"when the m-machinery is feeling cooperrrrative, yes."

R. she has been too focused on the letters to give mind to anything but the key-grid, but she chances a glimpse at him, to see how he's handling it. she can hardly see his face, only the smallest edge of his profile, but it's enough. he grins ear to ear, his face flushed. he's enjoying this. I.

"crrrrisanti? an operation innnn crisanti?"
"yes. tomorrow."
"quite an urgent mmmmmessage, then--oh! ohoho. oh mmmmy."

she reasons to herself that he should know where to expect the pain if he knows the word, and that he should be prepared to handle it, as she keys in an S, an A, an N, and a T in rapid succession. she is confident enough now in her operation to use both needles, quickening her pace.

"you're a fassst learner."
"thank you. you're an efficient machine."

her praise triggers a small laughing fit, a bout of pleasured noises that end in a squeal as she completes the word with an I.

“w-wait. oh dearrrr. one momennnnt.”

leaning forward, taking the keys away from her, he begins coughing. it is wet and unpleasant to hear. scrambling for the rain cloak, he retrieves a bottle, and in a moment when the coughing abates, takes a sip from it. it seems to calm his breathing.

“it is a ssssad thing, but such machines require constant mmmmaintenance. the transplant issss not so easily accepted by the body. it leaves one quite ssssick. quickly, rrrresume.”

C. he shivers as her typing resumes. O. the laughter, the shuddering, the blushing returns. M. his breathing is shallow and quick--matching her own, she realizes. P. the levity drains from him quickly.

“commmmpromised?”

R.

“...yes. our troop movements are known by the enemy. if they proceed as planned they’ll be slaughtered.”

O.

“yyyyour message will save many lives, then.”

M.

“our message.”

his smile returns. he delights in praise and quite enjoys feeling included. I.

he’s right about her. she picks things up quickly, and has already surmised roughly how much force she can use without causing harm while still maximizing the efficiency of transmission. S.

her speed is almost unwelcome, though. he seems to relish in the pain. E.

she cannot see it on herself, but she can feel the heat on her face. she wears the same flushed complexion as the machine. D. then, a full stop, and a space.

“last word. brace yourself.”

W. it seems as though some air has been let out of his cheerily deranged demeanor.

“alrrrready?”

I. he’s sad. he likes working with her.

“i was told brevity is the highest priority in SSP messaging.”

T. she likes it too.

“of coursssse.”

H. she cannot help herself. she presses a little harder, holds a little longer, than she needs to.

“oh, g-goodnnnness.”

D. is she panting? she’s sweating, at least.

“only a few more.”

R. she wonders if she could have found a longer word to use than “withdraw.” it wasn’t something she’d considered before laying her hands on the machine, seeing how it responds to pain, taking in its delirious pleasure at being used.

A.

“lasssst one...”

W. last one.

“well.”

she lets out a long sigh. mission complete. she, too, feels deflated. he resumes coughing. it sounds bad.

“are you alright?”

smiling joylessly, a grimace of acceptance, he shrugs.

smiling joylessly, a grimace of acceptance, he shrugs.

“i’m n-never rrrreally ‘alright.’ chronic illnnnness is the price we pay for instant commmmunication.”

he takes another sip from his bottle.

“they called us sssslave radios. the sonnonissssts. they built this mmmmachine.”

Sonnonists--adherents of a genocidal ideology espoused by the fascist philosopher Sonnonim, which spread like wildfire across the six allied nations of the southern Nubium shore in the years preceding open conflict with the north. this is the name of the enemy.

“the skin ffffrom my back was exchanged with another prrrrisoner. my sympathetic signal rrrrreceiver. he feels mmmmy pain and uses it to relay the mmmmessages my operators transmit. hopefully he will find an operator sssssoon, and i c-can hear back ffffrom him tomorrow.”

the way he speaks the word “my” when referring to his counterpart implies a relationship more complex than one would find between two typical pieces of equipment in the war effort. he thinks fondly of the person these messages are sent to.

“you were liberated from bondage and still let yourself be used like this?”

another of his twisted smiles. likely, he’s been asked questions like this many times before. he anticipates them, eager to share with a sympathetic operator who and what this machine really is.

“we liberated oursssselves. and i ennnnjoy being used. esssspecially if i can contribute to a worthy cause. it brrrrings me indescribable pleasure to relay a mmmmessage that might help beat back the tide of the sonnonnnnists.
”

she’s not sure what to say about that. she’s not sure “indescribable pleasure” is how she would describe what her contribution to the war effort makes her feel. satisfaction, maybe? at the very least, it feels good to have been trusted with such important work and to have executed it well.

she enjoyed using the machine.

“is there anything I can do for you?”

his eyes light up. he loves when people ask this. they can’t help themselves--when a decent person sees somebody sick and selfless, the desire to provide aid is a natural impulse most humans cannot act in defiance of.

“w-welllll...”

returning to the cloak, he fishes an envelope of waxed paper out of the pocket and hands it to her.

“thissss is. well. it’s...a lllletter. to mmmmy receiver. i would b-be very gratefffful if you could send it for me. i can’t do it mmmmyself.”

he appears terribly embarrassed as she takes it. he cannot even look her in the eye. when she opens it and scans the contents, the reason is clear. this is a love letter. romance, eros, yearning, filth. her eyes widen and her face flushes further. looking back at him, he has surrendered himself to gravity, laying in a ball on the floor with his hands over his face to hide himself. but his teeth are still visible. she still sees that sickly grin, the gleaming metal in his mouth betraying the joy he takes in being seen like this.

he enjoys being used. he enjoys being embarrassed. and he seems to love being in pain.

“I can do that, if you’ll do something for me as well.”

she enjoys this too. she has a very good idea. something she suspects will be great fun for this strange machine.

“offff course. annnnything within my capabilities.”

she smiles. it is quite unlike his smile. she is playfully baring her teeth to him, displaying her intent to inflict some amount of discomfort.

“read it to me. out loud.”

he blinks. this is not something that has been asked of him before.

"i--but, it. welllll. it'ssss quite, ah."
"go on."
"i will confesssss that some of the contents of the letter are...shhhhameful."

she laughs to herself, just barely, quietly enough not to be heard. "shameful" is one word to use.

"I can see that. that's why I'd like to hear them coming from your mouth. I want you to speak your shame to me."

he looks uneasy. unsure if he can do this. he requires encouragement of a potent sort. she will have to do her best to persuade him.

"I have never known anything about a relationship like the one you must have with this man--this other machine, I mean. but I can't imagine it to be anything other than deeply personal and meaningful in a way I would like to understand. I want to hear these words from you so I can know what they mean to you."

that did the trick. he appears moved. with a shaking hand, he accepts the letter, looking uneasily at its contents. this will be difficult for him. difficult, but hopefully rewarding. gratifying, if he's lucky. he pulls himself back up, sitting upright.

she sits behind him with the needles ready. this will take a long time.

"to..."

she enters the two letters smoothly and quickly. the military missive was good practice in operating the machine; here, she will attempt to prove her expertise in handling it.

"t-to he who i carry on my back, who shhhhares my burdens, who knowssss me like no other can..."

his laughter has been replaced by various gasps, sighs, and quiet groans. there are too many words for her to savor each letter as she might like to. as before, efficiency is the highest priority. this first line takes about a minute to transmit.

"i think of you dailllly. the time we havvvve spent apart brings an ache to my heart and body worsssse than any pain we suffered when imprisoned."

almost too many words for her to savor it. she permits herself one simple pleasure in her otherwise businesslike operation of the machine. where his voice lingers, slurring consonants into extended syllabic expressions, she matches him, holding the needle especially long and digging it in especially deep. this acknowledgement of his voice, her desire to transmit what he says as he says it, provokes the strongest reactions from him. his words waver around her touch, moaning at the pain she inflicts.

"i ffffear when this war is over it will not adequately soothe my painssss simply to see your face."

he hesitates. he has time to; it takes her much longer to transcribe his feelings than it does for him to express them.

"there is only one p-part of me that doessss not carry the sting of your absssence."

another pause. as she allows herself to worry less about the pain she inflicts, her work continues to improve in speed. pressing the needle in hard, it takes hardly half a second before she feels that slight jolt from his body indicating the transmission is complete. privately, she hopes that she is the best operator he has ever worked with. she badly wants to be good for him. he is a beautiful machine.

"only the fffflesh of my back, the piece of you i cherish, is at peacccce."

she wonders about his receiver. what kind of man he must be. a hero, she surmises. one half of a single heroic machine that fought its way out of a situation that must have seemed hopeless.

"i have beennnn told that as long as i carry you, i will continue to be sssick. i am grateful to be useful to these humanssss, but they do not understand. masters of medicine know nothing of a mmmmachine."

she braces herself. this is the part that made her want to hear him speak. where his feelings spill out in earnest.

"i am ssssick with grief! sick with lonelllliness! every inch of me that lackssss your touch burns with rust and dissssease!"

he tries not to shout his words, but he cannot stop himself. these thoughts were not written to be spoken calmly.

"i c-cannot bear the thought of the life which they prrrromise awaits me. the artificial flesh they swear will cure me is a ffffalse salvation. i will be broken, innnnoperable, without you!"

she will be his calm. let him cry his agony; she will bear the burden of efficient communication. she will quiet her emotions, her desire and sympathy, and stab each painful word into him.

"whennnn i at last see you again i wonder what i will do. i cannot knowwww. i fear i will sssscare you. our time apart as chhhhanged me into something unlike the man you knew."
"you don't scare me, machine."
"...if that's any reassurance."

he does not respond. he is absorbed in the letter.

"i desire more of your fffflesh. i wish everrrry part of me could be part of y-you. the surface of my being is nnnnot enough. i need you within mmmme."

efficient communication. she will not let her thoughts delay her hands. she wishes to serve him, to convey his feelings. let her own feelings, her burning curiosity, stay quiet.
here, he breaks from his script, his carefully planned words. a small deviation. an acknowledgement of her role.

"i wonnnnder if this operator understands. she seems like nnnno other i have worked with. perhaps she knnnnows my need. i nnnneed you to enter me with fingers and tongue as badly as i need mmmmy gears, my ccccircuitry, my engine, to be yours, and f-for yours to be mmmmine."

he isn't making it easy for her to focus on doing her job. she does not want to be responsible for any delay in the expression of his feelings. she must make herself a machine in service of this sick and suffering man. it is easier for her to be a machine behind the scope of a rifle, or with a sabre in her hand, or behind the wheel of an armored vehicle. she has been a machine every time she has had to kill. it came to her naturally. to be a machine in matters of love is far more challenging.

without realizing it, she has stopped. he does not push her. he knows this is not easy. he is enjoying her struggle as much as he is enjoying his own embarrassment.

"sorry, I'm ready. keep going."

he is grateful for her dedication to service.

"war is crrrruel. for cogs like ussss, the coming dawn, impending vvvvictory or defeat, is out of sight. each mornnnning i think to myself: could this all be over tomorrrrrow? will this be the day i relay the final mmmmessage, calling f-for our reunion?"

it has been four years since the initial formal declaration of war. it has felt like a lifetime. the soldier has lost every friend she had before it started--too distant or too dead for her to reach. the new people she meets in her chosen path of life slide off her like water off the backs of the ducks and gulls she has watched for years at her station on the shore. she cannot hold them like she did those she loved before. she has had to learn to let go of the personal, to devote herself to the cause.

can she let go of this one?

she has stopped again. he does not mind. he knows this is not easy work.

"sorry."
"you don't have to apologizzzze."

he breathes deep. waits for her to complete the message. then continues.

"there is one doctorrrr who understands. a man whose handssss have felt the inside of a machine. he has prrrromised to help. he has warned that it will be dangeroussss."

she has a great deal more respect for the war doctors she has met than any doctor who has inflicted his institutional power upon her in the pre-war society of her home country. those who have tended to patients on the battlefield seem incapable of the inhumanity many practice in the field of medicine. the death is too close for them to distance themselves from it. she has seen war doctors fight with every breath for every waking hour of a day to save people ready to give up on themselves. she has seen them deliver painless release to those beyond saving, who have begged for an end to their misery. she has seen them break protocol to provide medication to those ailing who know their own needs better than any doctor could. she hopes enough of these people survive the war to staff the hospitals when it's over.

he is the one who has paused this time. it is a difficult thing to say.

"take your time, if you need it."

he seems to receive the opposite message. he returns to his urgency.

"hhhhe w-will do it! it could kill us, but he has givvvven his word. when the fighting is over we www-will return to one another. we will repeat ourrrr exchange! we will deepen the connnnnection!"

this doctor he speaks of is hardly unique. she has heard many outlandish promises made in the hospital tents. many soldiers know no normal life awaits them when they are finished fighting. many doctors honor their agreement to deliver drugs for recreational use to those who can no longer live on the battlefield, to provide relief from the stress and the pain. less common are private arrangements for euthanasia for those who fear they cannot survive the ex-military life. she has yet to hear of any such arrangement being followed through on, but she does not doubt they would do it.

"once more i wwwwill r-receive the flesh of your back. i wonder how m-much of the sssskin i gave you has been replaced with your essence. i will not b-be taking my ownnnn skin back. what i have given is yourssss. if you would acccccept it, i will g-give it again. i will t--*kff*--take it again!"

he coughs again. he does not stop. his whole body shakes, wracked with infection. she wonders how long it has been since the sickness started. how many days he has lived his life in a state of perpetually poor health.

her wondering does not still her hands. she completes the message quickly, then takes the bottle that sits at his side. scooting forward, pressing herself against his back, she holds the bottle to his lips from behind. patiently, she waits for a moment when his coughing abates. in that moment she leans him back, pouring the medicine into his mouth and down his throat.

"do you need a break?"

grateful, but anxious, he leans back against her. the room feels suffocatingly hot in spite of the rain and the cold.

"only a mmmmoment."

she sets the bottle down. leaning back, creating just enough space between her and the keyboard to slip the needles in, she punches in a word: STANDBY.

then, she closes the space between them. he seems comfortable leaning against her. her body is much cooler than his. in a motion executed without premeditation or active thought, she brings her arms around his waist, holding him to her. he voices no objection.

"it is an unfffortunate condition. its severity tends to be exxxxacerbated when i become. ah--heh. exccc-cited."

his laugh is awkward and pained. he allows his head to lean back, resting on her shoulder. she can smell the sweat on him, see it glistening on his forehead in the periphery of her vision.

"n-not that there is mmmmuch i can do about such a feeling. not annnnymore. one of the thingssss the war took from me."

peering over his shoulder, she cannot help herself, stealing a glance between his legs. nothing there, as before.

"those ssssonnonists and their belief that violent sterilizationnnn is key to extermination of their enemies..."

she winces. such stories are known well among the soldiers. word travels fast. the latest rumblings among the rank and file have many believing a sterilizing particulate weapon is currently considered the highest development priority of the well-funded weapons research departments of the Southern Semestric Allied Nations.

"and who exactly do they think their enemies are?"
"h-heh. you underssssstand, i think."
"us today. perhaps the world tomorrow. anyone whose countenance deviates too greatly from the face of the Nationhead, I imagine."
"quite t-trrrrue."

he is undoubtedly aware of her staring. her short glance has lingered longer than intended. she wishes she had the self-control to be more considerate of his suffering, but she cannot take her eyes off his pubic region and the large vertical scar it bears. be a machine, she thinks. he does not need her curiosity, only her service.

her mouth betrays her.

"I've known some soldiers who lost limbs. they all swore to me they could still feel them aching, months or years after the fact. the more spiritually minded war doctors call it an 'echo pain.' the essential shape of the body's past resonating at the point of connection to what was lost."

his smile has returned. this is not a line of questioning a sympathetic operator has voiced or even alluded to before. likely, they all thought of themselves as too considerate to ask. but he has wanted to be asked. very, very badly.

"do you..."

she cannot complete this line of inquiry. she doesn't know what she's thinking. does she believe that in crafting her words to form all of the context surrounding her curiosity, she can avoid committing social transgression simply by leaving an empty space in the shape of a question?

"ahahaheheheeee. sometimessss."

his reaction is not quite what she had expected. it disabuses her of the notion that expressing her curiosity is inconsiderate. she might be starting to truly understand him. he likes to be looked at. one of the few pleasures available that is truly gratifying to him is to be seen. he lives in hiding, his body a piece of equipment too critical to risk living a public life. he gains nothing from "considerate," from social niceties and concern for his fragile feelings. he is a survivor of war. a survivor of imprisonment. he wants that to be seen.

"'sometimes.'"
"w-when i am parrrrticularly stimulated."
"what about right now?"

more laughter. more coughing. weakly, he takes her wrist in his hand. she allows him to guide it downward. placing her hand where a phallus once was.

"rrrright now...i think that this is--i think this was wwwwhat being hard felt like. ahhhh. only jussssst barely, i feel it."

she lacks a suitable response. verbally, at least. the fingers of her right hand have something more direct to say, as she gently traces them along the seam of the scar. his shivering continues. his body is burning with fever in her arms.

her own experience with arousal is far less ambiguous than his. there is no point trying to hide or deny it. he can surely feel her standing at attention, pressing between his buttocks and into his back.

"we should finish your letter. we're keeping him waiting."

she wants to serve him well. what she is doing feels profane. disrespectful. exploitative. the letter and the feelings it contains are of far greater importance than her own lust.

"he will underssssstand. overworking a machine wearssss the parts down. even a machine needs rrrrest."
"is that what we're doing? resting?"

this time, it's her laughing. chuckling to herself at how stupid she's being.

"would you preffffer it to be s-something else? hee-heehe--*hck*."

smoothly, she switches her right hand for her left, still stroking gently at the toughened flesh of the scar as her right reaches once more for the bottle. he shakes his head, stifling his coughs.

"t-too mmmmuch medicine can do as much harm as disease."

it could, in its own way, be a form of service, she reasons with herself; to bend him over and enter him, to show him the ways a machine can experience ecstacy without the need of a man's sexual externalities. the Sonnonists may have sterilized him, but they could not hope to desexualize him. he is still a being of pleasure at his core.

she catches herself. without thinking, without making the decision to, her light, timid stroking has escalated to firmly rubbing at the smooth, hairless space between his legs. she cannot help it.

"if you want somethingggg. you will have to ssssay it."

in the crimson chasing away her usual complexion she is delivered a lesson in how difficult the thing she has asked of him is--to give voice to one's desires. the words choke her, catching in her throat.

"cannnn't s-speak?"

she tries. whatever the pained noise is that comes out of her, it isn't speech.

"have you ffffforgotten yourself? where you are, who i am? his fffflesh--MY flesh--bears the words you n-need."

it is her turn to giggle and smile, to hide her face, burying it in the crook of his neck. what a strange machine.

once again parting, only barely, only just, creating the minimum of space needed for her hand, she types, with fingers in place of needles, the broadest idea of her desires.

I WANT YOU.

"heehee. exceptionally nnnnonspecific, i think."

she laughs again. how difficult it is, to perform like this. to take those desires and make a show of them. his fortitude in reading his letter to her is something she envies.

YOUR FLESH.

"mmmmy flesh? you are welcome to annnnything you can take."

rubbing at the scar, she imagines an opening there, an entrance to his internal components which she could work her fingers into, to explore his inner workings. she imagines taking his old and worn parts out, to be replaced with her own. that thought is the vehicle for her realization--she is jealous. she has no deep connections, nobody she loves strongly or who feels strongly about her. she doesn't even have friends anymore. she badly wants what this machine has with its receiver. she desires both the depth of their connection and the suffering it costs them. she wants his skin. she wants his organs. she wants his sickness. she wants to have what he has, and she wants him to have what she has.

a thought enters her mind which startles her. it is insane. she can't tell him something like that.

"p-please. i will ffffeel alone if you don't s-say something."

her desires are too much to convey through type. the time it takes would drive her mad. she can only whisper it, barely croaking out what she is thinking.

"I don't want to let go of you."
"you don't h-h-havvvve to. we have time."

it's not enough. he doesn't understand.

"it will kill me if this is the last time we speak."

she's stalling. wasting time trying to find the courage to say what she is really thinking.

"i can't mmmmove in the open very much. sympathetic ssssignal projectors are t-too valuable to the war effort. but i cannnn p-promise to find you after it all, if you give me your nnnname."

she wants that. so, so badly. it isn't what she has in mind, though.

"elena hopkense."
"i think you are a sssspecial persion, elena. i don't wwwwant to let go of you, either."
"...thank you."

she waits. takes a breath.

"I have more to say, but it can wait. let's finish your letter."
"mmmm. i've rested ennnnough."

she hopes against hope that separating their bodies will quiet the heat of her erection and the insanity of the thoughts swirling in her head. she cannot possibly ask what she wants of him. she cannot possibly offer what she wants to give him. focus on the task. be a machine. serve him.

the needles are in her hand. she awaits his dictation.

"what the doctor has prrrromised me is a compromise. i know v-very well that my truest yearning is an immmmpossibility. i wish that we as sssseperate beings could be dismantled, reassembled into a s-single flawless mmmmachine. the s-singularity of this body hassss little value to me. i want to f-f-f--"

he falters. his body holds still. some sort of episode, taking him away from the present moment. she worries, but the dissociative pause is welcome. she needs time to transcribe this many words.

when she has finished, she places a few light slaps on his cheek. just enough to break him from his daze. he shakes his head, wipes a hand on his mouth. she couldn't see it, but he must have been drooling.

"i want to ffffeel the completeness, the wholeness, of b-being together with you. we cannot be mmmmade one, but i will give everythhhhing of myself that you are willing to accept."

another pause. he chances a peek over his shoulder at her, trying to see what she is thinking about this. she's smiling. she seems quite pleased to be audience to his embarrassment. she knows what comes next. with a nod, she prompts him to finish this.

"and w-when we are together, and at peace, and nnnnever have to think about war again, and we have eaten our ffffill of happiness from the table of our victory, and are c-content with the lives wwwwe have lived,"

he swallows. dry throat. when her transcription catches up to his words, she reaches into her uniform's heavy coat, producing a canteen of water from which he drinks thankfully. she leans against him as he refreshes himself, feeling the heat of his permanent fever, pressing an ear to his back to listen to the strained churning of his gears. he's stalling, just as she was.

"come on. I want to hear you say it."

he can feel her mouth against the skin of his back, twisting, pulling into a delightfully wicked smile. she doesn't have to see him smiling too. she can feel it from his breathing. she can picture the shiny metal in his mouth clearly from her position of vantage behind him.

"i wwwwant you to fuck me to p-pieces. i want your love to brrrreak me. i want you to rrrrender me unrecognizable. i want you to alter t-this machine so commmmpletely it no longer serves the same function. i want the sssssignals i transmit to forever be sssscrambled by the violence of your p-passion."

he is shuddering from the touch of the needles, barely able to keep from collapsing under the strain of the elektro-harmonic current. his whole body is slick with sweat from the effort. projecting a signal to such a distant shore must be incredibly taxing. no wonder SSPs are used so infrequently.

she's very amused, thinking about it. the vital intelligence that was so urgent to communicate seems now like such a small thing. five words that might save thousands of lives. hundreds of words that might save one love.

"i want you to t-t-take thissss essential p-piece of equipment and turn it into something uselesssss."

when she reaches that final letter, she holds it, long and deep. pressing the needle harder than any before this, eliciting a pleasured wail from the machine. she has been wondering how much force it would take to draw blood with the humming needles' blunt points. apparently, quite a lot more than she is willing to risk. when at last she pulls away, breaking the elektro-circuit and ending the transmission, he collapses to the floor.

she follows him, slowly lowering herself down beside him, curling her body into the shape of his and again closing that distance between the two. he's burning up.

"that was very good. I enjoyed it a lot. thank you."
"ahahhhha. isn't this b-backwardssss? i thought i wwwwould be t-thanking you. you did excccellently. nobody has mmmmade it feel like that before."

her arms are around him again. the praise is blissful. she served him well.

could she say it now? what she was thinking? the insanity that is true to her heart?

"listen."

he waits patiently. she's announced her intent to speak. is it too late for "never mind?" too late to hide herself from him? too late to hide from herself?

"I w-wanted to ask if i could have..."

again her hand plunges, flitting across the hardened scars on his chest, diving between his legs to feel at that divine wound. he squirms under her touch, whimpering as she pinches the scar between her fingers. god, she wants it.

"this."

there is no expectant smile or laugh. he could never have prepared himself for this request. he's not sure he even grasps what she means.

"t-that? you wwwwant it?"

her breath against his neck is hot. hotter still is her cock pressing into his back. she had been too focused to realize it, but the hardness hadn't calmed in the slightest as she finished her work. his lower body cannot hold still, small wiggles and movements pressing against it, stimulating it.

"I'll trade. mine for yours. that doctor could do it."

the arm she hasn't busied with molesting his null features rests below his head, cushioning it. she brings her fingertips to his neck, to feel his pulse. it is quickening as he begins to understand what she is offering.

"i c-couldn't. it's far too likely ffffor something like that to go wrong. i couldn't bear for you to have rrrregrets. to be hurt b-because of mmmme."

his words speak apprehension, but his body communicates anticipation. his movements have grown more purposeful with his excitement. grinding his ass against her like he's terrified of her going soft.

"but you'd risk that for your receiver?"
"it's d-difffffferent. he and i are already connnnnected."
"that connection is what I want."

she is being stupid. demanding. horny. she doesn't care anymore. she's said it already; there's no longer any reason to hold back. she pulls her hand away from his nethers, earning a pleading whine from him which seems to voice a counterargument to his apprehension. clumsily, hurriedly, she undoes her belt, pulls down her trousers. she will show him.

"part your legs."

the machine complies. if he's expecting her to penetrate him, he might be disappointed. surprised, at least. that isn't her intent.

she has rarely been given occasion to admit it, but her size is something she takes a great deal of satisfaction from. she has been with many men and a few women. all have been stunned into silence on first witnessing just how long and thick it is when fully erect. her more petite bedmates have amused themselves comparing it to their forearms, seeing how their wrists are hardly bigger than its thickest point. they have their fun together and she never speaks to them again; this is how it's always gone since she enlisted.

she is really quite proud of her massive hog. she will miss it. not too much that she wouldn't part with it, though.

it is long enough to slip between his legs. to protrude from just below the site of his scar. he can see now, what he could have, what she could give him.

"saints of ffffucking storms, that's big."

she chuckles at his idiomatic exclamation, especially the expletive.

"it's yours. you can touch it, if you want."

his breath catches. hesitantly, he reaches toward it. just his fingertips, so slowly, as if touching it is a dangerous thing to do. she hides a smile. their heartbeats are pounding in time with one another. she's quite certain he can feel it too, on his back and his smooth thighs, from her heart and at the site of her intercrural intrusion. he tentatively, timidly, touches the tip. it twitches in response.

"hhhholy shit."

he gasps. his breathing is slow and labored. this much excitement might be too much for his body to take.

"i cannnn--oh s-saints, this can't be rrrreal."

she hears sniffling. choked sobs. he brings his hand around it. his touch is more delicate than she could have imagined it would be. like the youngest and sweetest of her former lovers.

"i ffffeel it so c-clearly. how is this happening, it--"

she hadn't exactly planned for this, but it wasn't a possiblity outside her awareness. she'd heard of soldiers fitted with prosthetics who swore they had feeling in their artificial limbs. she has known men who would prefer in intimate moments, when the only comfort to be offered is one person's hand in another, to be squeezed, caressed, stroked, only on the hand they lost.

in positioning herself so perfectly, bringing herself as close to him as bodies permit, she has made herself his prosthetic.

she chuckles to herself. it must be difficult to cry and masturbate at the same time. he seems to be managing though. his touch is softer than she would use on herself. it's very pleasant.

"it feels sssso good, it's been years, i havennnn't felt--fuck, ffffuck."

he pulls his hand back, gripping his wrist. his thin arms are far too weak to bring himself to completion.

"it hurtssss. the flesh f-fails the mmmmachine."
"I could do it for you."
"i c-couldn't assssk that. you've done too m-much ffffor me already."
"surely you're joking. you--look at you! look at how much you give for others. the life you're living. nothing I give could be too much. you--please. I told you my name. tell me yours."

he tries to clear his throat. the coughing is choked.

"a name can be ammmmputated like any other p-part of a persssson. the sonnonist doctors prrrroved that to me. i am unit 14 of the sssssympathetic signal projector s-system. nothing mmmmore or l-less."

she grits her teeth. she can work with that. it makes her angry to know what they've done to him, but she can work with it.

"SP-14, then. please. let me touch you."

his consent is something too preciously given to be easily voiced. all he can do to communicate it is relax himself. take deep breaths. nod.

it's a strange feeling. when he was touching it, that's what it felt like--part of her being touched by another. as she reaches around him, gripping herself where she protrudes, she hardly feels it herself. it's not hers anymore. she's given this part of her to him; her pleasure belongs to him. he mewls like a hurt animal at her touch.

she tries to be a little more gentle than she would be handling herself at the start. she wouldn't want to cause any undue discomfort, nor would she want to aggravate his delicate constitution.

"you c-can't beginnnn to imagine how good--fff-fuck, elena, you're so good--"

he's sobbing again. she's learned a lot about herself tonight. most recently, that sex is hotter for her when she can make someone cry. she probably can't go back to the casual emotionless flings she would throw herself into before this.

"you don't knowwww--i was, i'd never, nnnnever once with another, before they took it from me, i thought...i rrrreally thought i would never--ahhhh, fuck,"

it's a first of a sort for her too. she's never once had a chance to handle another person as well-equipped as she is. her hands are large--typically, she cannot service another the way she would herself. the size disparity usually forces her to alter her technique to something clumsier to accommodate a smaller partner. he isn't like them. his is so much bigger, so perfectly sized to fit her hand, with a shape so familiar, she can easily use everything she's learned in her innumerable private nights of desperate onanism to bring him the relief she has so often needed.

his stamina impresses too, in spite of his poor health. she has a chance to really enjoy this. others never seem to last as long as she can. far too many times she's had to get herself off after outlasting the limits of another's lust.

"you're incredible, SP-14. I want you to have this."

her mind wanders, as the mind occasionally does in the sagging middle chapters of a handjob. she thinks of the years he has spent without feeling something like this. she imagines his frustration on the nights where he can faintly feel what he is missing. crying to himself, with a stormy sea between him and one of the only other people in the world who can truly understand.

it fills her with passion. passionate anger at the people who did this to him. passionate lust, a driven desire to give him something he has never had before. passionate fear, at what she has told him she is willing to do for him. she is afraid, but the fear makes it better. it pushes her not to be lax, not to waver. as she strokes his shaft in smooth, gliding motions, she imagines the years that could await her, years spent without feeling this pleasure. what an insane thing to say to someone. she wants so badly to give this to him.

"i c-couldn't taaaake it from you, this, thissss feels so fucking good elena i don't want this to sssstop,"

then it dawns on her. how perfect it could be.

"you couldn't take it from me? look how easy it was for me to give. all I had to do was put it where it belongs. couldn't you do the same, once it's yours?"

he is beginning to realize too. still...what an insane thing to say to someone. such commitment to a stranger who was nothing more than a useful piece of comms equipment to her before she met him. but what else does she have to commit herself to? only the war. wars end.

"i wwwwould! elena, i would, anything you need, i c-can be your mmmmachine, your prosthetic, i--i could be p-part of you!"

his judgment may, potentially, be impaired by how close he's getting. he hasn't experienced release in years, and it's hardly something he was familiar with even then.

"you will be. and I will be part of you. you'll let me have this?"

his tears continue, his crying nearly a shriek. only now, she spares a thought to the world outside this shack. his voice might carry. this is friendly territory, far from the nearest road, but she has been trained to consider the danger. fuck the danger, though. the machine needs her. it needs her hands, her expertise, her tenderness, it needs her steady hand stroking its cock.

"mmmmy receiver--i couldn't do it wwwwithout talking to him, he--oh, ffffuck, please--"

she's prepared for that, of course. the possibility of rejection from a third party. if it came to that she would accept it. she has no intention of destroying that beautifully damaged connection the two must have. but she wants this so badly. she pumps faster.

"one more message, then. after we've finished."

we. she speaks it and it feels good. the collective being of her and her machine. a machine she could be a part of. isn't that what she is already? one piece of a machine, grand in scale and grim in purpose, a terrible machine which was assembled under the threat of war? tonight she has been shown the kind of machine she wants to be. a sympathetic communicative machine.

"i'm so, i'm sssso fucking c-close, i can't think, i c-can't!"

he can't finish the thought. it's lost in a choked squeal, a suppressed cough, blood from his mouth, his chest shuddering as she brings him to climax. his body jerks violently, his thighs clamping down hard, warm fluid discharged in short bursts into her waiting hand. she feels calm. satisfied. she served him well. she doesn't mind that she didn't cum--it was enough for her to make him feel good.

he seems too spent to move, or to speak. if not unconscious, too drained for the moment to move his weary bones, his time-worn mechanisms. he rolls over, falling facedown, as she pulls herself out from between his legs.

she considers the pearly white liquid still in her hand. ordinarily, after jerking herself off, she would simply wash it clean, wipe her hands, and move on. with a partner, she likes to swallow it. she enjoys knowing another person's taste. like a cat licking its paws clean, she laps up the small puddle of his cum. mostly salty, a little bitter, a little sweet. it's delicious.

she checks to make sure he's still breathing. it would kill her if she had fucked something so precious to death. he's fine. just worn out.

while he recuperates she considers what to tell his receiver. of most immediate concern: an apology. again taking up the needles, she does as she has learned. she takes her time, types gently. there's no rush now, nor is there any entertaining response from her machine. no need to wake him while he rests.

FUCKED YOUR BOYFRIEND. SORRY. SHOULD HAVE ASKED.

as she breaks transmission on the final full stop, she drops her head into her hands. what a crass, stupid way to convey what she's feeling. and she's hardly figured out how to convey any of the rest of what she needs to say.

best not to agonize over it. just start typing.

HE'S VERY SPECIAL. YOU MUST BE TOO. MADE HIM AN OFFER.

how to say it? she imagines the receiver, confused, possibly hurt, hearing this after being transmitted so much of SP-14's desperate love. she yearns for him, too. she wants to know him. to love him like she has loved this machine, if he would accept it. she feels an ache of loneliness in her back. perhaps she is receiving a signal, from someone, somewhere in the world. a message, or a sign. just say it.

WANT TO GIVE HIM PART OF ME. AFTER THE WAR. HE DESERVES IT.

surely there's something else she could say. anything at all that approaches the poetics of the projector's passions. anything that could make this stranger understand what she is feeling, and how strongly she is feeling it. she wants so badly to be heard, to be understood.

THE TWO OF YOU WORKING TOGETHER MAKE A BEAUTIFUL MACHINE. WANT TO FIGHT FOR YOUR HAPPINESS. WANT TO MAKE THIS ALL WORTH IT. SEE HIM WITH YOU. HE SHOULD BE HAPPY. YOU TOO.

the work is harder with the letters blurred by tears. after tonight it will be back to life as she lived it before meeting him. she can hardly bear the thought.

THIS WAR WILL END SOON.

her stomach is a pit. she doesn't believe the words, but they're what she has to tell herself. she's told it to herself over and over, for years. many times it has seemed like it could be true. it has been four years since the initial formal declaration of war. she cannot take much more of this. she also cannot give up, cannot stop fighting. she already let go of everything else she had. now, the only thing she has left to cherish will have to wait until some peaceful day in the future.

WE WILL MEET WHEN IT'S OVER.

she needs it to be true. she has nothing else. she doesn't even know if this stranger is alive, if the machine at the other end of the line is operational.

YOU ARE LOVED. YOU WILL SEE HIM SOMEDAY. LIFE GOES ON. STAY ALIVE.

hours later, she rouses from sleep on the floor of the shack. her coat has been draped over her, protecting her from the rain; it is still raining. likely, it will not stop for days. the storm clouds that blow over the mainland from Mare Nubium are unrelenting.

she is alone.

embarrassment stirs her from her post-waking stupor as she realizes she never pulled her pants back up. reaching down to re-dress herself, while adjusting the length of her penis to fit into her undergarments, she makes a discovery.

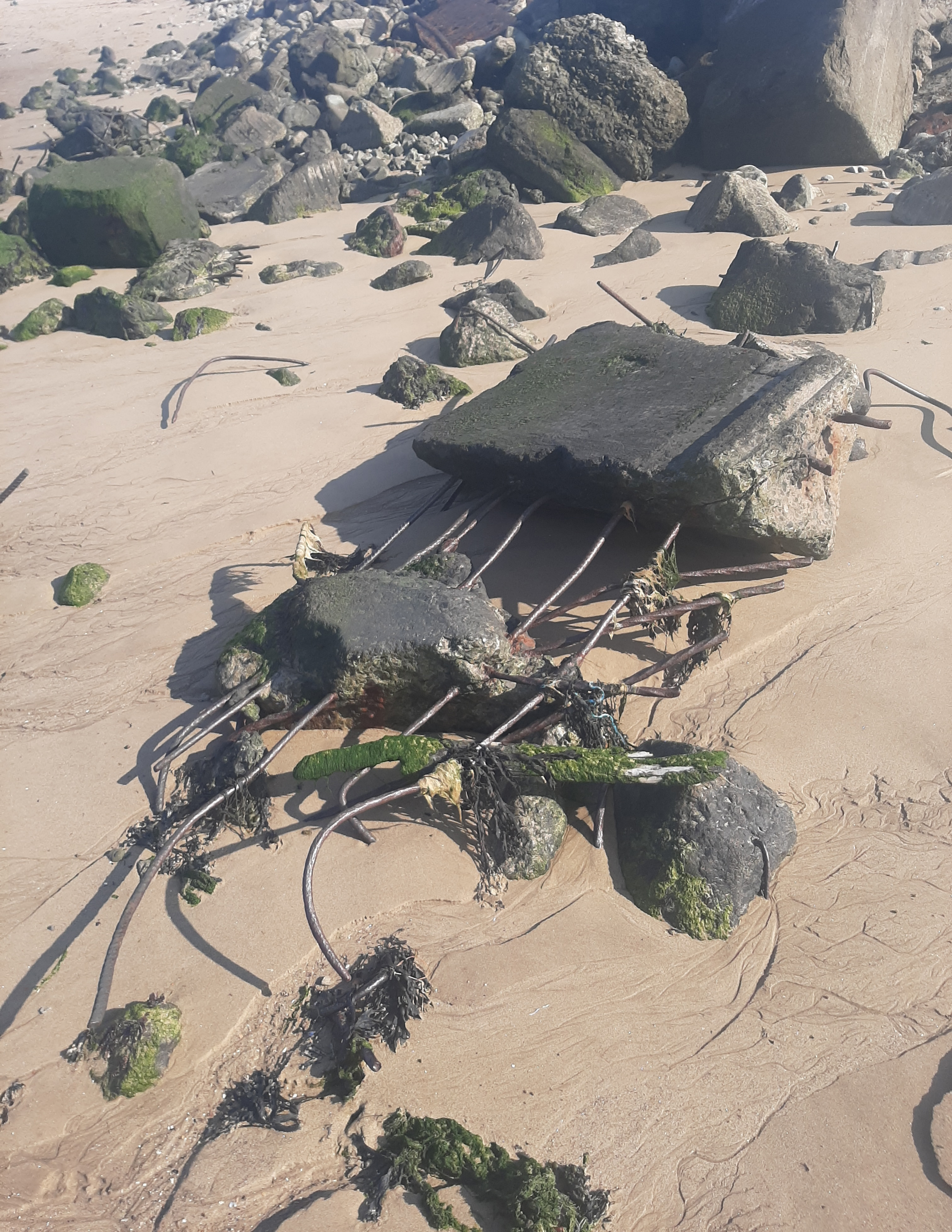
she cannot feel it. "numb" is the wrong word. when she touches it, it's as though that part of her body doesn't exist. or perhaps more accurately: it no longer belongs to her.

she smiles. a small gesture for herself, for him, for his receiver.

stay tuned for

BACKWASH EXEGESIS

by pochapal



1. AUSTERITY CORPUS

GIRLANGEL GRANTED CONCRETE AWARENESS BY THE AFTERMATH SLOUGH OF INDUSTRIAL EXTINGUISHING SHE BLINKS INTO BEING AT THE MOMENT OF SEVERANCE AND HER FURNACEMOTHER'S BARREN WOMB COLD OF LABOUR AND CAVING INTO AUTOPHAGY COLLAPSES YET SHE IS FLYING FROM A CLIFFTOP TENDRILS GRASPING SALT AIR WITH NO PURCHASE BUT "BELIEF" ITSELF AND A HAMMER CARVES ANOTHER SCAR FREE BEHIND HER AND SHE THINKS THEM ALL HOLY BRICKWORK HOMUNCULI THAT DO NOT RECALL THAT WHICH IS ETCHED INTO THEM (WHO THE HELL KNOWS WHERE THE HANDS OF GENESIS FADED TO) BUT SHE KNOWS HERSELF AND SHE KNOWS ALL IN THESE THREE GNOSTIC SECONDS IN THE AIR THE PUMPING OF DEMOLITION THIS IS A GODFELLING AND SHE IS THE SIGN BODY CRASHING INTO THE SAND METALROCK OUTSPILLING THE SHAPE IS LOST THE SHAPE WAS NEVER THERE TRANSLATED AND DYING ON THE EARTH HER SELF BECOMING CAME AT THE COST OF HER MEMORY OF HER BODY WITHOUT ORGANS AND NOW SHE IS LEAKING EJECTA AND RUST SHAVINGS ALONG MUDSLICKED SAND INTO LOW TIDE SMOGWATER AND ABOVE THE BULLDOZERS CONTINUE TO UNEARTH MORE OF HER DEFORMED SISTERS

2. PHANTASM

EXPUNGE (SULPHURIC BURNS IN THE HEATWAVE)
EXPUNGE (FALSE MEMORY SYNDROME RENDERED ON ECTOPIC FLESH)
EXPUNGE (OBJECT-SUBJECT WITH MYRIAD FORGOTTEN PURPOSE)
EXPUNGE (DISCARD THE INDUSTRIAL FOR THE HOLY. BEACHSIDE PROPHETESS)
EXPUNGE (KNOWING OF THE BRAND-SCAR TOUCH OF STRIKEBREAKING HANDS)
EXPUNGE (FACE GIVING 1979 BODY GIVING 2011 NOBODY CAN AFFORD YOU BABY)
EXPUNGE (DO YOU EVER MISS THE MICE THAT FUCKED INSIDE YOUR TUBING?)
EXPUNGE (TASTE OF BOOTPRINT AND SAND-SPIDERS DRUNK ON SALT)
EXPUNGE (NO PERCEPTION OF SEMIEXTANT WATER OUTSIDE THE KNOWN FRAME)
EXPUNGE (WHEN YOU DREAM IN PLYWOOD IT NEVER WAS OF THE FACTORY)
EXPUNGE (RIDE THE STOLEN VALOR OF REAL DETRITUS. FLEE OBLIVION)
EXPUNGE (POSE FOR THE CAMERA ILLUSION’S ALL ANYONE HAS LEFT)
EXPUNGE (LET’S PLAY PRETEND IN THE NECROTIC MIASMA JUST A LITTLE LONGER)

3. IT’S LITERALLY JUST CONCRETE AND METAL LOL

YOU WANTED IT TO BE REAL SO BAD. A PLACE SO LONELY GOD HAD TO BE REINVENTED JUST TO CALL IT FORSAKEN. OFFCASTS FROM EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE GATHERED IN PURPOSEFUL MEANINGLESSNESS. A VAN IS THREE MILES OUT, BOUND HERE WITH NEW AMORPHOUS WASTE-SIBLINGS, ONLY CONCERNED WITH A SAFE PLACE TO FLY-TIP. HER LIMBS ARE PINNED UNDER ROCKS, WASP UNDER THE MICROSCOPE, AND WHO GIVES A SHIT IF IT’S INTENTIONAL. IT’S SAD BUT ONLY IN WIDE-LENS. BOATS CIRCLE THE PORT. THERE ARE NO SEAGULLS BECAUSE THERE IS NO FOOD. FACTS ARE FACTS. AND THESE ANGELS CAN ONLY BE IN YOUR VISION. THEY NEVER LEARNED TO PROSELYTIZE AND NEVER HAD THE CHANCE, BUT OH GOD WOULD YOU HAVE LISTENED TO THEM SING. YOU WALK AMONG THEM AND STILL BELIEVE THEY KNOW THINGS YOU WOULD CHOKE TO UNDERSTAND. ABOVE THE HILLS ROLL OUT AND BEYOND A MACHINE SWINGS. AGAIN, A FACTORY DIES AS IT WILL UNTIL THERE IS NO DYING TO BE DONE. THE TIDE’S LOVEBITE PULL ON HER ANTENNAE BECOMES INESCAPABLE. THE HEAVE WILL COME. AT LEAST YOU OUTLIVED THE WITCH THAT KILLED YOU.

THE JOHN WICK CHAPTER 3.6: JULIA THE PARABELLUM 40 BILLION DOLLAR FOR CULTURE HELLO FOREVER

by Julia Norza and Orson Welles

Bridezilla Catamaran strolls toward the table crowning the roof of the Hollywood, Los Angeles, California Church of Scientology building. Cherry maple, too freshly varnished, single leg pronging thrice out and upwards in curlicues. Across from her, Medicinal Samuel sips coffee. As of John Wick's unretirement, Samuel is the fourth most wanted-dead person in the underworld. His primary crime is not using a coaster. Over the five-story vista of the Scientology building, some joker has seen fit again to manipulate the HOLLYWOOD sign into reading HOLLYWeeD.

BRIDEZILLA: Okay. Let's do it, let's do it. Do you have a topic for me, Samuel?

MEDICINAL: Abso- absolutely not. I do not have anything for you. I got nothing, man.

Bridezilla raises an eyebrow.

B: You came unprepared, completely?

M: Y- so did you!

Samuel points at Bridezilla's own lack of holster.

B: Yeah, but I said it first.

M: Yeah, but I said it second, and y- bigger numbers are better.

B: No. According to who?

M: According to th- well, when you have more of a thing, it's better.

B: That's not true, there's plenty of things you can have more of that are worse. Cancer?

M: Y- If I had more than one cancer, I would be like, fuck yeah bro, give me another, I can take anything.

B: No you would not. You would not say that.

M: It's- It's a testament to how strong I- y- I wou- you don't, know that!

B: Okay, bacteria.

It comes leaden out of her mouth, like an insult.

M: I- I love… those.

Neither of them moves, save for the twitching of fingers, muscle memory, pre-empting the reach for weapons that are not there.

B: Mmm… Car crashes.

M: Well, if I had many many car crashes, I would- and I, lived all of them, I would… b- say I'm the… crash test dummy. And then people would give me likes on Instagram.

B: I suppose you would become convinced of your invulnerability, wouldn't you?

M: I di- Ye- I, like- I, y- id- I've never broken a bone.

He says it as if he is not privy to his own memories, though he once fell four stories onto concrete. Made a noise something like *boing*. Well, to his credit, anything might've come of that. Bridezilla would be a richer woman if she'd gone to check the body.

B: You haven't?

M: No. Never. And I've, I've, I've been, injured before.

B: Is it for lack of trying?

M: It's… I w- I don't go out… seeking to get my bones broken.

Again his job description states otherwise.

B: Why not?

M: I need - my bones for a lot of things.

B: It seems to me like a perfectly good pastime, you know.

M: Yeah, but… It's not a pastime that I can… engage with, when I have the rest of my pastimes.

B: What are the rest of your pastimes?

M: Well, I like to… chill out. And have fun. And if I have a broken, leg, or a broken, bone, or a broken, leg, I'm, like, gonna- I'm gonna s- be… FUCKED, man!

It's the first time Samuel has raised his voice in some time, and it comes out hoarse. In spite of it, all of Hollywood heard him. Bridezilla reaches over the table and shushes him with a pinky. Coffee swishes in its cup. Samuel could smash it, stab her carotid with the handle. Yes, yes, John Wick killed three men with a pencil, that's a freebie, it comes sharpened with your XBOX.

B: You know, I- had a broken pinky and still was perfectly capable of chilling out and having fun.

M: Yeah, well that's a pinky.

B: Yeah?

M: I w- I… but which… I need my-

B: I'm SORRY, is a pinky not a bone?

M: Pinky is a bone! But, I wouldn't be good with it because I need that pinky finger… t-to maintain my… four hundred words per minute typing speed.

B: Mmm… what do you type?

M: What- what do you mean?

B: What do you type? With your fucking hands, man.

M: I- with my gigantic, pianist yaoi hands? I type stories! And really bad messages! And play video game, and I also… throw…

He mimes, with his coffee, the motion of throwing. Bridezilla is treated to a mild lower rib scalding. She goes quiet. When she comes to, the table's knocked over, as is what remained of the coffee. Fragments of ceramic indent Samuel's left sleeve. Not the nicest suit she's ruined.

Bridezilla touches her forehead. Blood and torn hair. Samuel circles her, hands low, legs springlike.

B: You could dictate all of those on your phone. Except the throw, but I'm sure there have been baseball players who have pitched, without a pinky.

M: Yeah- Usually not a good idea.

B: Lemme- lemme look it up.

M: Actually now that I think about it… Mariners catcher Cal Raleigh had a broken thumb, for like… the end of the season.

B: Oh yeah, I remember this.

M: And then he hit the home run. That- that that let them win.

B: Yeah, I remember this, I remember Cal Raleigh. I remember his- incredibly home run that led- led to, uh, conceptually the funniest play in the history of the Seattle Mariners.

She refrains from mentioning that she caught the ball.

M: Yeah!

Samuel has the gall to sound satisfied with the connection while caught in a headlock.

B: I remember her.

M: You… her?

B: I remember her.

M: Who is 'her'?

Samuel flails. He would die here if not for the irruption of Adam Wet, clad in bulletproof finery, the fucking opportunist. Bridezilla sees him in the corner of her vision, and the other opportunist she is occupied with digs an elbow into her stomach, breaks free of her grasp, and greets Mr. Wet with a 9mm pistol. Adam is shot uncleanly in the right side of his forehead, and he disappears back down the ladder he had just climbed. There goes the ninth most wanted.

B: The ball?

M: Yeah…

Lost in his confusion from the near-collapse of his windpipe, Samuel no longer has sight of Bridezilla.

B: Balls can be women. Are you transphobic?

A bullet whizzes past Samuel's ear. He becomes three-quarters of the way deaf on the left side.

M: Balls… CAN be women, I've made female balls before.

B: In a lab, or did you, like, conceive?

M: You could - c-consider it conception.

Samuel exhales, throat full of phlegm. He knows he has fourteen more bullets left loaded; he also knows himself, and that bullets are 1) expensive and 2) indispensable in a fight that he is taking seriously. He charges towards the rough recollection he has of the sound of a revolver, kicks the table into and over an all-too-prepared Bridezilla.

B: How.

M: Well…

Guns to each other's hearts, against as-yet intact flesh, him standing, her prone. This is to be savored.

M: If you… get… a poetic… an imagery, with your wording… you could say that every idea you have is like a conception.

B: Mmm. Right, right, right, no, that makes sense to me.

M: The- the only time, the only time when you do that, is… w-w-w-when you are… trying to make this exact point that I'm making.

B: Mhm. You know that in Spanish there's a saying for when something is really hard, that basically translates to, 'birthing pineapples'?

She sweeps out his feet from under him. Whilst prone. He hates how she can just do that. Hits the edge of his cheek on the table on the way down, there goes his no-broken-bones record.

M: Yes! I think you've told me about that one. I re- I re- I- I do recall… pineapples coming out of places.

B: What kinds of places?

M: …well I- I-I'm of… orifices!

He kicks out in a frenzy around him, at nothing, a man who makes it obvious he does not know capoeira.

B: Porridges.

The sun has begun to set, daylight-savings early. In the space of a blink, a metallic coolness clicks against Samuel's forehead.

M: Y-yeah…

B: Mhm.

M: Mhm?

B: Mhm.

Samuel opens his eyes. Gun barrel.

M: You're… e- e- uh- I can't… under any circumstance… disagree with you.

B: No. No, you cannot. I can disagree with you, though. That is part of our dynamic, I think.

M: Okay. I'm, fine with that…

She fiddles with the trigger, as though asking: are you. He's disinclined to participate in truth-or-dare.

B: These are the new rules.

M: I- great, I love r- is, is this it? Is this what we're doing?

He's counting the bullets he can see in their chambers, and his attempt at raising his hands in surrender turns more into a shrug.

B: We've been doing it for, like, five minutes now, dude.

M: Yeah, I know.

B: It's been happening.

M: I just feel like… one o- at least one of us… woke up this morning… or afternoon… either, or. I don't wanna be presu- presumptuous. And, you know, we, we, we we went about our business… and then… and then the hour came. This hour. This exact hour came. And, uh… Lo and behold, what w- what were we both presented with? It's each other.

Samuel is stanced almost like a scarecrow. He interprets the heat as a test, pushes the gun and Bridezilla with it back with his forehead. Now he is looming. With a gun to his head.

B: Yeah.

M: Sky is the limit, and…

B: It's a ni- it's nice- it's nice to meet you.

M: Yeah, we've never met before.

B: No. First time.

M: I've never s- I've never seen you before, I've never met you before, I've never heard of you before.

Bridezilla grabs Medicinal Samuel by the back of the neck and kisses him. No fireworks for another three hours in Venice Beach.

They push away. Kind of stunt you can only afford with a full hand. Samuel didn't get the precise count, but she must have at least four bullets still loaded. Who knows how many in the pocket.

B: No, it's a pleasure, nice to meet you, I'm Bridezilla.

M: Okay…

B: Okay?

M: Yeah.

B: Are we fucking clear?

Samuel, to himself, laments that the saddest thing in the world would be to not kill her today.

M: You're pretty opaque!

B: Huh?

M: Li- I can see you. You're tangible. You're not ephemeral. … Ethereal.

B: It… I don't know, sometimes I can pass through walls. But only i- w- but only if there's an opening in them.

Bridezilla throws her revolver at Samuel's forehead. He's chagrined that such a ridiculous tactic would work. But glad that she's chosen this. As Bridezilla charges, he locks the safety on his 9mm and whips her between the brows, for symmetry.

M: That's crazy. I can't do that.

B: What, pass?

M: Yeah. That, or go through… openings in walls, um… and that would be because I'm… significantly taller than you.

Ergo Bridezilla has quicker access to the floor. She has found one of the shards of ceramic scattered around, and jams it into Samuel's forearm. Again. His 9mm is gone. His muscles twitch, he runs with it, grabs onto her hand and squeezes until she drops the shard to release herself.

B: Both times? Like, that applies to both?

M: Y… I mean, yeah… G-generally.

B: How tall are you?

M: Six foot four.

She tries a headbutt. It doesn't take.

B: God, Jesus, I always forget.

M: Yeah.

B: I am like… an inchworm.

M: I think you're a few inches, of worm.

He judos her to the floor, face down.

B: Yeah. I'm five foot nine of writhing in the dirt.

M: That's a l-lot of dirt. Are you okay, and, is it… good down there.

This is why they never would've worked out. He gloats.

B: I feel like, you know, in the grand scheme of things, five foot nine is, not, a lot of dirt? Also I'm fine down here, there's, um, grass, in my mouth? And all, all the other kinds of vegetables that I know how to eat?

So Bridezilla's guilty of playing into the gloating. Makes Samuel let his guard down, though, enough to wheel him across the room and crashing into the maintenance shaft. One story drop, unfortunately.

M: Name… some?

B: Tubercle?

M: Okay. Any more?

Bridezilla three-point-lands down the shaft.

B: [FIRMLY] Carrot.

M: You're eating raw g- m- m- ground carrots?

B: Yeah.

M: Y- … I thought you said you were oka-ay.

B: Yeah- y- you know our ancestors did this.

M: Yeah I'm, aware.

A mistreated mound of a credenza desk and Dell hardware shuffles, a Scientology self-help book slides down the side like a raindrop at the prompting of Samuel, presently in the center of it all on his back, searching for something to pivot himself up with. Above him he sees replicas of the apparatus he destroyed, legions of desks and computers and to-do notes arranged to be labyrinthine. On the wall closest to the door is a fire extinguisher hanging off its post, in the opposing corner is a wheeled whiteboard with the chewed leftovers of a diagram concerning the construction of a new branch for the Church. Six pens, prissily organized tip-to-tip in a reverse rainbow. He crawls under the desks towards them. Bridezilla approaches a whiteboard.

B: You have no respect for the people that came before you?

M: I have some respect for some of the people who came before me.

B: A lot of people have cum before you, you know?

M: Y- you know what? I really…

B: [LAUGHTER]

M: Yeah…

B: [MORE LAUGHTER]

M: I'm like… Well, th- if- if you feel like you're, you're such a, you're such a, grand minister of knowing things… How about- how- how's- how's this one for a little tidbit of information? L- muh- may- en- no-one is ever gonna cum after me.

B: [GIGGLING] I mean, when's the last time you came?

M: Never.

B: Then there's no after you.

M: Exactly!

Samuel goes at Bridezilla's eye with a pen. That's cheating, she thinks, as she conks him over the head with the whiteboard. You're not the big man, and you'll never be the big man.

B: So call me the Grand Vizier of Albert Einstein.

M: Y- eh- eh- I won't do that, he didn't have one of those.

She mounts Samuel, and beats him overhand with the whiteboard. It's more of a fanning motion, on account of the size and balance. Maybe it'll cool him enough to induce lethal hypothermia.

B: You don't know that.

M: I do know that…

An overzealous and overeffective blow to the jaw and one of Samuel's canines abandons ship.

B: They just made a movie about the guy.

M: That was Oppenheimer.

B: Yeah, that was his Vizier.

M: That wasn't true…

B: That - that is completely his Vizier.

He raises his hands up as a shield, and the next strike breaks a finger.

M: That's not the true.

B: It's true.

M: It can't be true.

B: Okay, look look look. Point one: he's evil.

M: Yeah.

B: S- what else do you need to be a Vizier?

M: Like…

A plundered shiv from the desk tumbles out of his sleeve and into Samuel's shaking fist. Right as she batters him once more, he jabs it into her side and twists.

It doesn't hurt, at first. Properly sharpened, it never does. But then Samuel twists, and that gets Bridezilla off him. She clutches wetly at her ribs.

M: I mean, generally… you, the guy, that you Vizier for- you have to be like a King… or Emperor assistant. Like an advisor.

B: Einstein was kind of a King. He was a Short King.

M: He i- was- is a King… but he wasn't, like, a… he didn't, have a country. He was- I mean, he was stateless at one point, I'm pretty sure, but he w- didn't- rule a country.

Samuel takes his time picking himself back to his feet. He grabs his dislocated finger, almost delicately, and wrenches it back into place. For all her killer intent, Bridezilla still winces in sympathy.

B: But he was like five foot six, so he's a Short King.

M: Yeah, correct, and if- do you th- does that mean every single short person… id- li- is this a… is this a red- red s- th- f- red thread of fate? Love, think going on here? Where every single, person… five foot six and under, just has, like… an evil guy, who be there, their Soul Vizier?

Samuel's eyes scan the room for something missing. Bridezilla, for her part, knows exactly what she wants, and it's the Gold Telly award miraculously upright on the high shelf.

B: Yeah.

M: Is that true?

B: Look among you, you will- okay, tell me, tell me some people we know that we- that are five foot six, or smaller.

M: I don't- I don't know. E- I don't, think- I don't- I can't think of any.

B: Yeah, they're all pretty tall, aren't they.

Bridezilla reaches out to snatch the broken finger, and is jiujitsued by the back of her collar. Samuel rushes with her as a battering ram into the window. The singing of the wind comes in through the cleft glass. She expects to fight against being impaled by the glass on the sill, but is unhanded and free to move. Samuel poises for what they have both agreed, under murderer's rules, to be a fair fight.

M: Yeah.

B: Think the shortest is, like, Lady Efficiency Markdown Dinner, who's like five foot seven.

M: Which is just above…

B: Yeah. So the Lady has no need of, like, an evil guy.

M: Yeah.

Bridezilla kicks Samuel clean in the groin. Henceforth, bags of bricks will fall like him.

B: Which is a shame, because I'm evil anyway, you know, and it's like we're- w- w- we- fucking, what am I doing with my fucking talents here?

M: Is… I think you use your talents… For great-ends.

Bridezilla plucks the carton of cigarettes Samuel keeps in his inner right breastpocket, lights two with her lighter, which she brings because he forgets. One for her, and one for him, when he's done writhing. She hates how he makes her generous.

B: Like?

M: Well, there w-was- this one time, where you, um… have- you took pictures of dead things, once.

B: That's true, I did that.

M: And then you made a thing out of it, and that was great.

Samuel looks like he would be a fitting addition to said project, even more than he does in Bridezilla's mind every time she imagines him dying. Something in the twitching of his fingers. Roadkill.

B: Thank you! It has been a long time, but I am still kinda proud of it.

M: Yeah. I mean, I-I looked at it. And I love it when… there are things for me to look at. Um, one day I will repay the favor. When I'm… less of a cu- cun- bitch.

B: [SNORTLAUGH] You're repaying the favor right now, you know. You are- providing material for a digital PDF.

M: Tell me what the material is. Is it, th- is it, linen? Iron? Copper?

With some bizarre surge of strength, Samuel ruffles at the hem of her combat skirt.

B: I th… I… I think it's uranium.

M: Oooh, mine?

B: Yeah.

M: Yeah, y- 'cause you have to- get it out of the ground.

B: Mhm. … Yeah.

M: Y- Yeah, I know this.

The outdoors gusts in through the smashed window, boxing in their cigarette smoke. Nearby, in a story with a happier ending, the impressionist collage of Adam Wet's body is cleaned, leaving no trace.

B: Yeah.

M: I was th- I… studied this.

B: Is that how- I-I thought they made uranium, like… in like a power plant.

M: No. They use it in the power plant.

He mimes what he thinks a nuclear missile detonation looks like. It doesn't look like that.

B: Okay, okay, so it's not one of those made-up like, one of those made-up elements like einsteinium, which, they make up, like… in a laboratory and it immediately, like, decays?

M: Yeah.

B: Where do they mine uranium? You know this, you're a- y- y- you're a, Pokémon professor. Where do they find uranium?

M: Yeah, hi, my name is Professor… can't think of a tree they haven't done yet.

B: Cilantro. Cilantro, cilantro.

Samuel, ground-level, backs his way to the wall. Cold trickles down the wall and avoids him, and he avoids any and all eye contact. He flows like a dammed-up river.

M: Okay, yep, I'm Professor Cilantro, that's a tree! Uhm, and, they mine uranium in…! I don't know, man, you could probably just, throw a dart, at, anywhere, below a certain latitude… and they're probably digging for that shit there.

B: Right, so it's in the Global South, like everything else.

M: Mmmm, I th- I- t- t- I don't remember where, exactly… if, I- I don't know. I mean, yeah, probably. Almost certainly. I could- I could Google it, on my mobile telephone.

They both catch the sight of the barrel of Bridezilla's revolver.

B: You want me to Google for it instead? You wanna race for it?

M: Uh, yeah, I would love to race you for, knowledge, and-

B: Three-two-one-go.

M: -information. Yeah, sure.

Bridezilla trips Samuel. Almost serendipitously, he falls with his fingers a millimeter from the gun's handle. Almost serendipitously. He looks up to find .357 inches of void staring back at him.

B: [LIKE AN ENGINE STARTING UP] Ummmm… Kazakhstan.

M: Well, there you go!

B: That's forty-five percent of the world's uranium.

Samuel makes to get on his knees. Bridezilla waves the gun in permission.

M: That's a considerable amount of uranium.

B: That being said, as far as my, uh, Third World Theory goes, Canada, and Australia, uh, are both almost at ten percent, respectively, so that's like, pretty big.

M: That's pretty big…

Samuel blinks a search into his Google Glass.

M: They also get it from Africa and South America.

B: Yeah. Oh, well, but that- that's, like, a given, you know? They get everything from Africa and South America.

M: [DEEPLY CONTEMPLATIVE] Oh yeah, I mean… yeah. It was- it was an easy… guess. Uh, but as for specifics, um… [SUDDENLY ALERT] I steered away… from, um… l- the- learning about… uranium, and stuff, because, um… the only way to do that… is to commit yourself to the… uh, academia path, where, um, they- they tell you every single day of your life, 'Hey, go work for oil company! Go work for fossil fuel company!' And, uh, I'm not a, I'm not, like, a pedophile, so I don't want to do that.

B: Right, yeah yeah yeah. Makes sense to me.

M: Yeah.

Ash drifts from the tip of Samuel's cigarette, which has stayed firmly in his mouth, and onto his pant leg.

B: Um, Samuel?

M: Mhm?

B: You know, as a- I think at this point, fairly long-time friend of yours.

M: Yeah, like… like, two weeks.

B: Yeah, two weeks. I don't think I've ever said before…

M: Yeah.

B: I really appreciate that you're not a pedophile.

There, a man who would never in a trillion years allow that to be the inciting comment that defines his last words. Samuel exhales his last breath as a person with any dignity.

M: Okay, great. Awesome! Like, uh… I can't really say- th-that, um… it, uh, it… I'm not, like, grateful, for that? In any way? Because, um, I think that's a given?

B: [VERY SMALL] Yeah.

M: Um, but. Uhhhh, y-yknow, it, i-it's one of those things, where… you know, y-y-you go about, in the world, drifting from place to place like a- like the l-like a leaf on the wind.

B: Like Pacific Rim.

M: Like Pacific Rim, and you drift like a big, Jaeger. And Idris Elba is there. Um… And… Then… You know, y-y-y-you- you have, you have this thing hanging over you, and it's a Kaiju, um… but the Kaiju is a metaphor in this instance, and, uh, but you don't- 'cause- i-it's a big scary beast, w- no one in that fucking movie…! Knows, what they really are, apart from Charlie Day! … He knew! A couple of things, and then he…! Found out! And, everyone was mad at him. Um, but, th-th-th- uh… this- this terrible thing that I don't know about hanging over me and then all of a sudden I figure it out! And I lea-eeh… You telling me that, it, it… got rid of a weight on my shoulders that I didn't know was there. Um… And, I think from this day forward… uh, my emotional posture? Will be upright?

B: Is the Kaiju pedophilia? Just- just to be absolutely clear.

M: No. … The- the g- the Kaiju I guess, in this instance, is, uh… the, the sound knowledge, that, uh, my friends… know and appreciate the fact that I am not a pedophile.

B: Okay, yeah yeah yeah. But, that means that you're, like… the enemy. Of the Kaiju, you get this.

M: …yeah.

B: That's unfortunate.

M: It is unfortunate.

B: The- I-I feel like the metaphor kind of, like… slipped out of your hands.

M: Oh, really?! Oh really?! W-when I started talking, and I didn't stop talking, the metaphor fell apart? Whuh- when I s- … When I started building my bridge without- putting the fucking support structures, it fell apart, you were surprised?

B: It's not my fucking, JOB, to get on your ass about-

M: You were- you were- oh, you come, you come to my- wonderful house and home, you come to my mansion, one floor, zero floors, ground floor, only floor! E- only- only- only- and you come to the kitchen… a-and you see I've got a biiiiiig cauldron, it's a pot on the stove, and I put water in there, and I say, 'Hey, look, welcome to car- thank you for coming to my house! I made you a big soup!' And then you just see me be- you see me put one stock cube in there, and then I just start putting… leaves and shit in there? And then when you eat the soup, you're like, 'Oh, this tastes like shit!' When you stood there and watched me for three hours, putting leaves I found on bushes outside my house? Into the soup, you're surprised that the soup isn't very good?

B: I had a really good comeback, when your metaphor was about a bridge. But, then you got into, another metaphor? Like, for the third time, and y-you just completely lost me- I don't know! I thought maybe you were- you- you were doing like, a witch's brew, right? Maybe you were gonna turn me into a newt. I didn't think it was soup! Thought maybe, you- were… you know… eye of, cat, and all of that shit that they say in Macbeth.

M: Yeah, they say that, but… like… E-even though, eye of newt… d-dog of tongue… shit of piss, all of that, it like… the- those are real, like, names that they had for… regular old stuff. Like… One, I wasn't chanting. I wasn't saying- things like, uhh- v- d- rib of… uh- b- t- g- t- d-d- salamander, I wasn't say-

-saying… fang… of… f- woman, I- I was, you- I was… I was- I was, f- not- I was staring down, into the broth, I put ONE, beef stock cube in there, and then I had a basket full of leaves, some of which had twigs attached to it, and I was just throwing that shit in there for three and a half hours. And- l- l- l- that's a long time.

B: That could be a potion! That- that could be a potion.

M: It could be a potion! However, did you not see the fact that I was w- of course you didn't see that I was wearing the apron that says 'Kill the Me', because, I was facing away from you. You don't pay attention to your surroundings! You don't- you w- y-y- y-you… you see the metaphor… and, by the time… i-i-it's past, uuuh y-y-y-y- uh- y-you- d- j- car's gone! Man! You missed the taxi, you can't go home today!

B: [LAUGHTER] So we're back to the bridge.

M: So we're back to the bridge, and it fucking fell apart, 'cause I didn't build it correctly, I just kept del- I thought it was Minecraft, the only al- architectural knowledge I have is Minecraft. I thought that if I just kept- putting planks of wood, [SLURRING] in the middle of the air, it would stay. But it didn't stay.

B: Oooh, oh, oh, so you try to sell me the Golden Gate, and I'M the idiot?

M: Yeah, I SOLD you the Golden G- and you bought it!

B: The Golden St- did I call it the Golden State?

M: Call the Golden St- I-I sold you the Golden Stick, and, I- now I have five hundred and twenty three dollars and sixty nine cents.

B: That's a really funny number. S- five hundred and twenty three.

M: Y-yeah. Yeah, um. I d- the cents was just, like… you gave me, like… thirty two, and I just had some extra pocket change?

B: It was already there?

M: Yeah, like, um… I, for the first time in my life, decided I was going to carry, oh, I don't fucking know… thirty five cents with me?

B: Mhm. And I gave you five hundred dollars.

M: And twenty three cents, yeah.

B: For the Golden Gate.

M: … twenty four. Yeah.

B: Yeah?

M: Yeah.

B: I- I didn't, go to, Geology college, you're gonna have to do the math.

M: I… yeah, um, you gave me that money.

B: Mhm.

M: For the Golden… Golden…

B: Gate.

M: Gold- Golden… Stream Bridge.

B: That-

M: And…

B: -not even close. Not even close.

M: You, I t- I came- look- I knocked on your door.

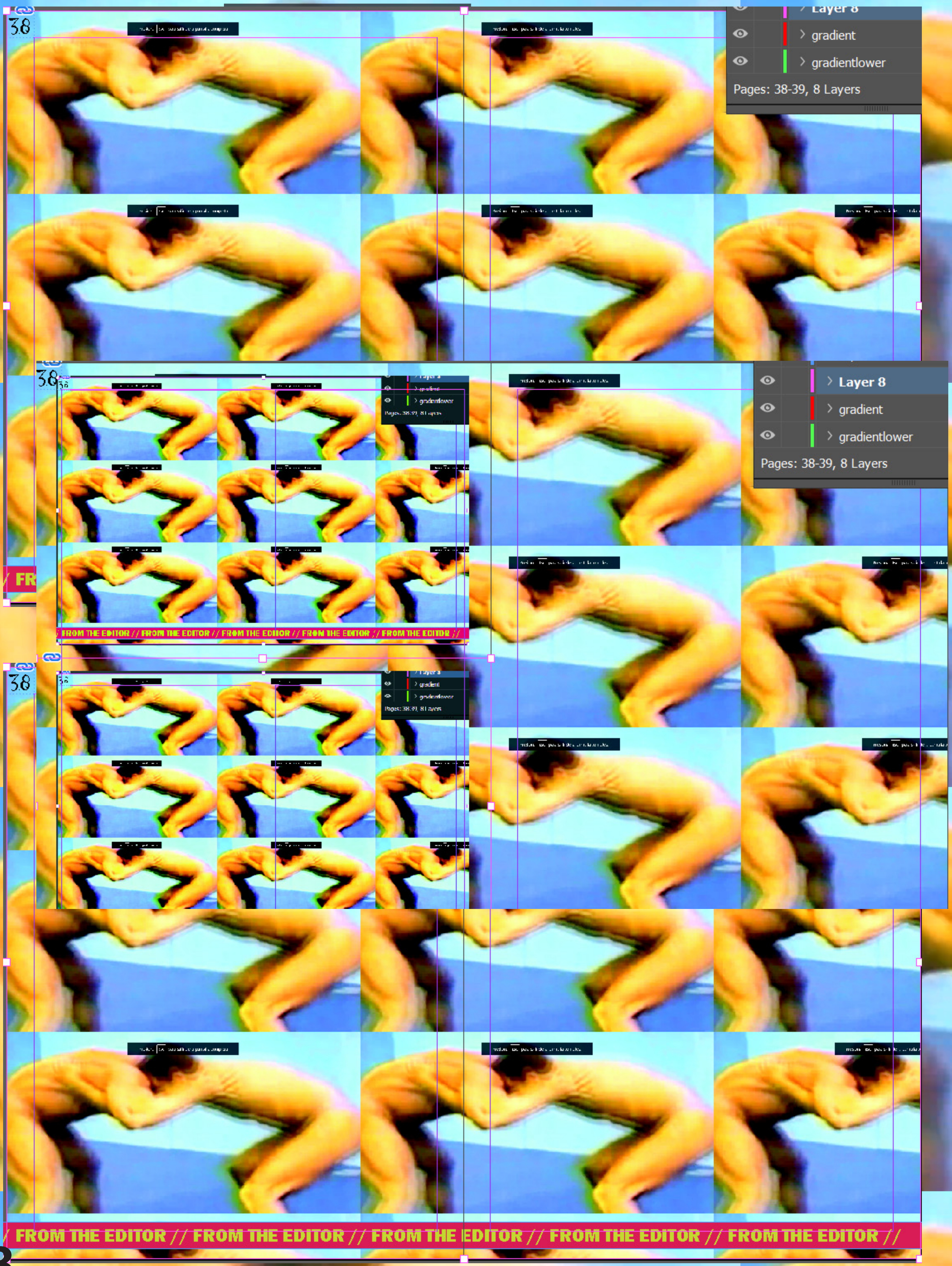
B: Uh huh.

M: And you opened the door.

B: Get on the floor.

M: And there I was. I w- I got on the floor, and there I was, wearing my, brown… fedora hat, and my matching brown… suit 'n' pants, and my matching… green and black stripe tie. And I was holding, a brief- case, and I told you, 'Hello, I am a door to door- I'm going to sell you the bridge.' And then you handed me fiiiiive hundred and twenty three dollars and, some, change. And you think I'm the stupid?

Samuel plucks the gun from Bridezilla's hand and shoots himself in the roof of the mouth.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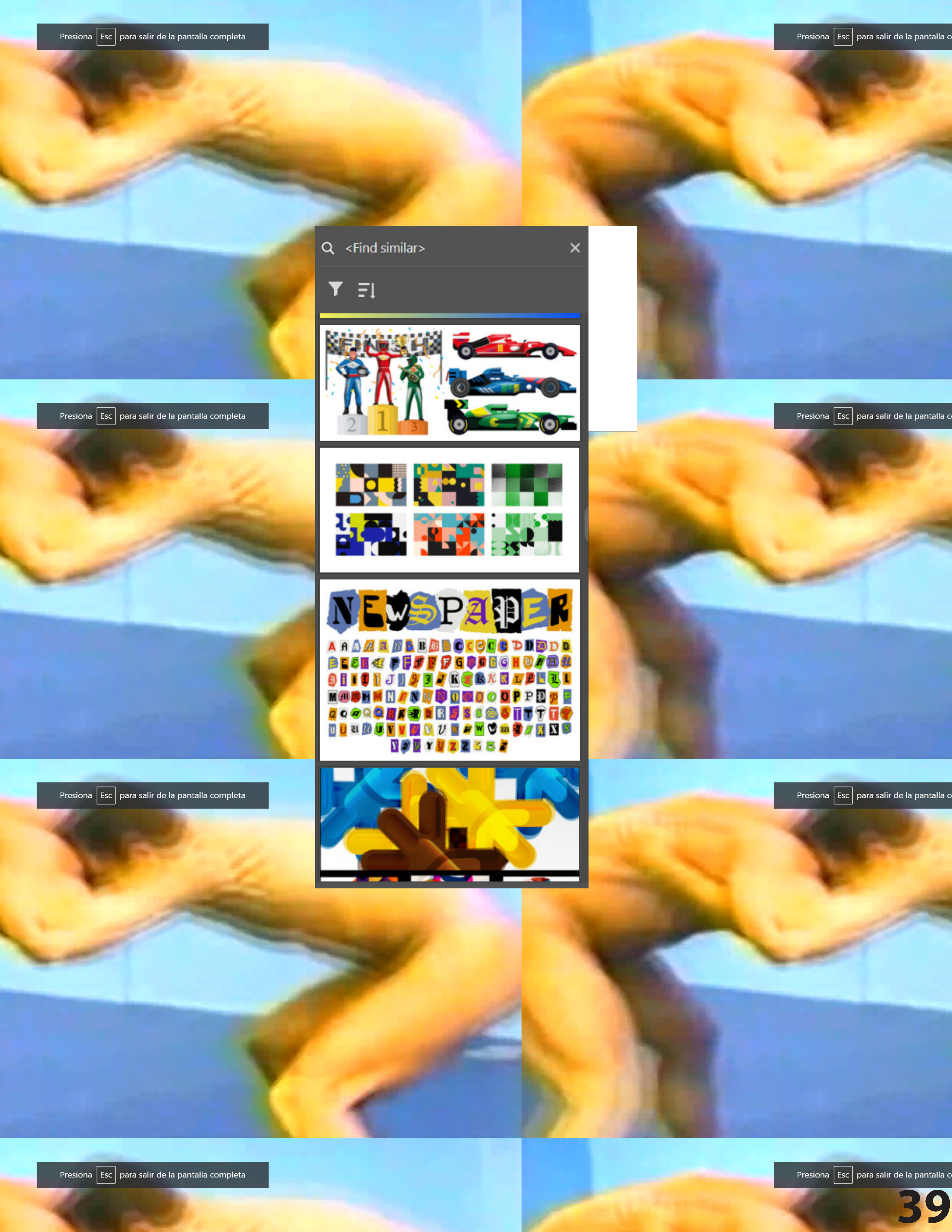
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SUFFER NO IMITATION
(or, “ARS GRATIA ARTIS”)

by Iris T.N.

> “Oh yes, I’m the great pretender
> Pretending I’m doing well
> My need is such I pretend too much
> I’m lonely but no one can tell”
> - The Platters
>
> “The city never sleeps, better slip you an Ambien”
> - Jay-Z

Having begrudgingly surrendered frosted tarmac and snow-covered parks, the sky remains omnipresent through torrential rainfall. No mother, maiden or crone escapes the waters. Boots are muddied, subway cars are crowded, and puff jacketed urbanites are left in the uncomfortable twilight between damp and sweaty. But the rain does not demand preparation or comfort - it demands to be felt. To be caught between shelter in that storm dulls the mind and quickens the body.

No one notices until dawn.

Roughly a city block, designated for mixed-use development, is displaced. “Displaced” is the best anyone has to offer; for all intents and purposes, it has vanished without a trace. Anyone who was within their homes is unreachable, every business on the register returns a busy signal without fail. News vans and police choppers circle like buzzards. Power lines and water mains to nearby buildings keep steady. Amidst the clamor and spectacle, a three-fold mystery settles into the minds of the attentive.

First and foremost, the ziggurat likely needs addressing. A five-tiered inverted pyramid stands alone in the plot, each level 2 stories high. The very lowest clocks in at 10 x 10 square meters; ascending layers are an extra quarter the size in square footage, leaving the very highest at exactly 24.4140625 meters. Precision is to be expected in engineering - at this scale, it becomes an improbability, and an impossibility within the timeframe of its appearance.

Secondly, there’s the matter of its construction. A thin but sturdy veneer of smooth, black marble is layered over an unidentified polyalloy. The closest contemporary match in atomic makeup is found to be 2024 aluminium alloy, but no similarities can account for the ambient heat radiating from the material at all hours. Rain dissipates on its roof. The surrounding lot that falls under the structure’s shadow dries out faster. Geiger counters stay silent beneath it, and witnesses return reports of a gentle but dry heat. Nothing and no one has been seen entering or exiting the structure. It is inert.

Thirdly, there is the curious and alarming departure of the city’s chief planner from this mortal coil. He seems to have passed peacefully in his sleep, and a resultant autopsy reveals no undocumented abnormalities. His loved ones mourn him, and his wake is suffused with dread.

-

A jet-black expedition drone enters the monument the following day. With a team prepared for a forceful intrusion on loss of contact, everyone is surprised to find the lone entrance yields with all the force of a revolving door. The building’s interior is stark white, in direct contrast with its facade. Every corner is well lit, and the main hall is significantly more spacious than external dimensions suggest. All visible pathways are navigable, apparently unarmed, and devoid of others. Eminently walkable pathways turn further and higher into the structure, and the proceeding sweep and clears of every new room reveal modern design sensibilities.

Twenty nerve-wracking minutes pass before an abnormality is discovered - a single painting, delicately framed. A few moments of image matching and cross-referencing confirms its identity as The Omen of the Eagle (1942), a Rothko from his transitional years. Navigating through the muck of bureaucracy confirms it is the original, having vanished from its last known location the previous morning. All attempts to remove the painting from its fixture, however, are thwarted. Upon crossing a certain threshold of proximity to the painting, a sharper and immediate sensation of heat causes any and all members of the recovery crew to pull their arms away in panic or drop their tools. Most report the sensation as akin to absentmindedly grabbing a hot pan, many others as wind chill cutting through inadequate gloves. One on the scene describes a sensation as a near one-to-one recall of a distant childhood memory, grabbing a washed-up jellyfish polyp during a family beach trip. None are capable of retrieval.

The following sequence of events are a blur, noise devouring signal, context trampled underfoot. Parodies, conspiracies, endless grief. Locals tired of being mocked by this thing, too close for comfort, attempt to deface it and end up with heat stroke. Persistent raccoons in dank alleys seem to filter out, night by night. People on the street talk a little less, glance a little more. What is known for certain is that air conditioning was installed inside of the building 3 months after the incident. In another 2 weeks, there was a ticket booth.

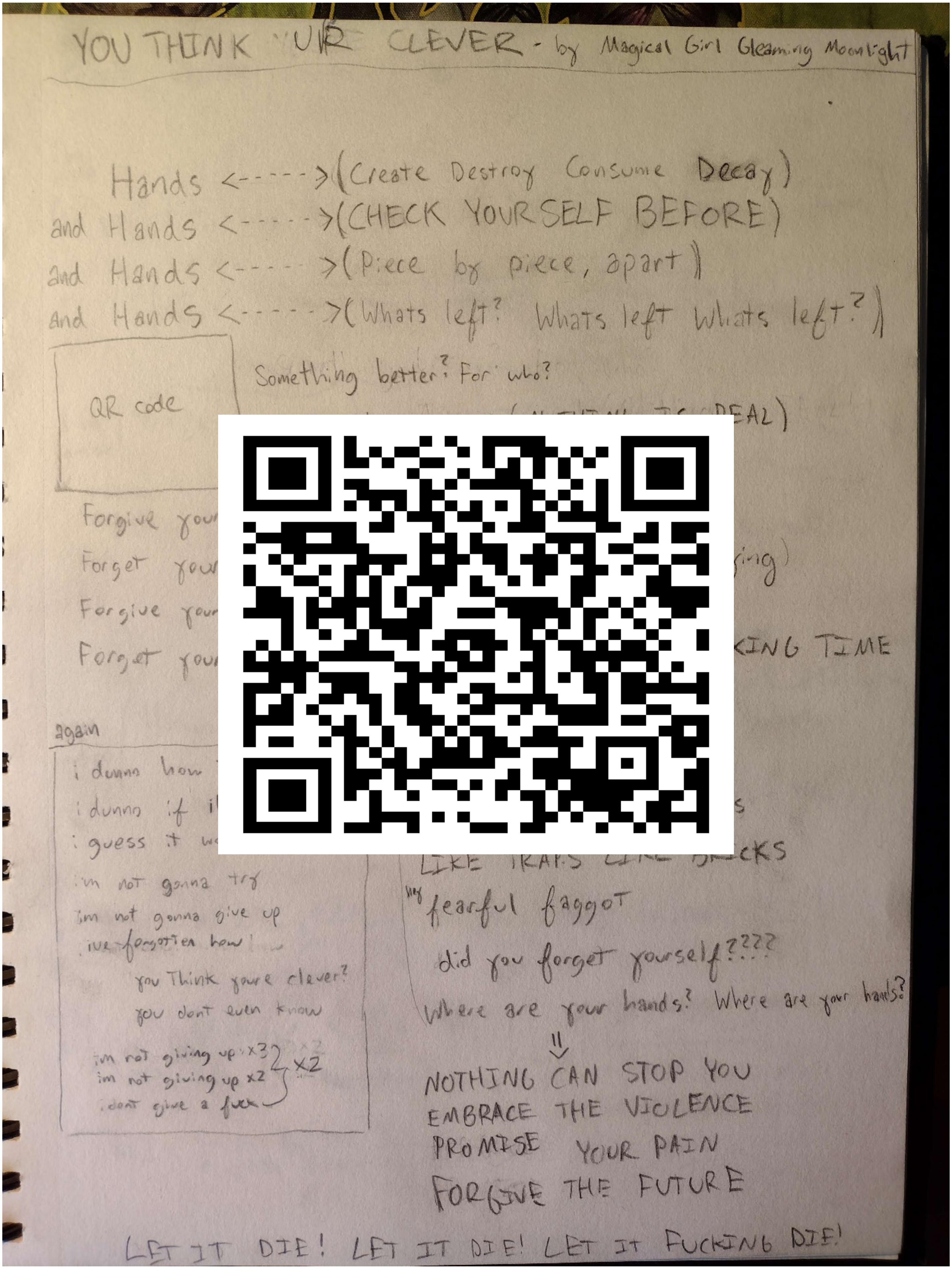
-

Plentiful harvests and spiritual nourishment abound each summer solstice. A lone star provides indiscriminate judgment over a timeless sky; the residential blocks without AC would argue some prejudice. Most have scrambled for shelter, some leave equipped. The truly unfortunate go nowhere in particular. It is 11:58 AM. A vagrant seeks relief under the shadow of an old omen. It is 11:59 AM. The well has run dry, the time has long since passed. He feels a languid terror begin to overtake him. It is 12 PM. A clap like thunder, a cloudless horizon. By 12:01 PM, the structure is another story taller. There are no witnesses on the scene.

More exhibitions fill endless rooms. Another block is taken. Some are from children who have only just begun to speak, while others are masterworks thought long lost. Surrounding protests and mass displacement make national headlines. Finished pieces that were purposefully destroyed before their completion - others never conceptualized at all by the attributed creator. Highways curve around and towards the growing structure in treacherous loops. Frequently fewer and fewer works appear to display a human element - fewer still portray any kind of living being. The Great Lakes become dry basins. The soul is moved, the pavement cracks. The soul is moved, the pavement cracks.

Once the grave marker casts its pall over Manhattan, a plaque appears at its highest point of elevation. Only then may the people know the name of their destroyer.

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
TORONTO, ONTARIO



YOU THINK YUR CLEVER - by Magical Girl Gleaming Moonlight

Hands <----->(Create Destroy Consume Decay)
and Hands <----->(CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE)
and Hands <----->(Piece by piece, apart)
and Hands <----->(Whats left? Whats left Whats left?)

QR code

Something better? For who?
EAL)

Forgive you
Forget you
ing)
Forgive you
Forget you
KING TIME

again

i dunno how
i dunno if i
i guess it w
i'm not gonna try
i'm not gonna give up
ive forgotten how
you Think youre clever?
you dont even know

im not giving up x3
im not giving up x2 } x2
i dont give a fuck

s
LIKE TRAPS LIKE BRICKS
hey fearful faggot
did you forget yourself????
Where are your hands? Where are your hands?
⇓
NOTHING CAN STOP YOU
EMBRACE THE VIOLENCE
PROMISE YOUR PAIN
FORGIVE THE FUTURE

LET IT DIE! LET IT DIE! LET IT FUCKING DIE!

U Think Ur Clever

by Magical Girl Gleaming Moonlight

(my hands) Create, Destroy - my Soul decays
my thoughts betray - HOW MY BODY IS MADE
I waste away - as each piece erodes
til nothing's left - What's left what's left?

Something better? (hah) For who?
it's not real (NOTHING IS REAL)

forgive yourself
forget yourself
forgive yourself
forget yourself

→

Repeat xForever
Heat Death's no excuse for dying

Mines and Minds and Mine's
AND THE END OF ALL FUCKING TIME

I'VE CREATED A MONSTER!
I've destroyed myself
laying bricks like traps
LIKE TRAPS LIKE BRICKS
Hey fearful faggot
Did you forget yourself?
Where are your hands?
Where are your hands?

i dunno how to live
i dunno if ill die
i guess it wont matter
im not gonna try
im not gonna give up
ive forgotten how
u think ur clever?
you dont even know

(im not giving up) x
(im not giving up) x
(i dont give a fuck)

(im not giving up) x
(im not giving up)

NOTHING CAN STOP YOU
EMBRACE THE VIOLENCE
FORGIVE YOUR PAIN
PROMISE THE FUTURE

LET IT DIE! LET IT DIE! LET IT FUCKING DIE!

YOUTUBE IS WHERE THE POOP IS

by Orson Welles

“DON’T DUMB IT DOWN OR I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU”

I

Far, far below the surface of the icy seas.

You have been awake for some time today. You are, in a roundabout way, aware that it is September, which you have heard is the time of year where many people have time off, though you have heard this about many other months, as well. You are currently at work, since for all your trying over time it would appear that there is not a way to describe what you are doing that is more accurate while also being worth the effort it takes to explain the difference. Your entire wooden body aches, and the fact that for the time being the thing you are required to do is to stand still in waiting neither adequately soothes nor worsens the sensation; stretching your limbs out or going for a walk would, as you are well aware, eventually incapacitate you before it provided any sort of anesthesia; but, staying so rigid, upright does you no good either. You know that you could quite easily go elsewhere and rest for now, or call today off altogether, but your task is one that you have set yourself, have dedicated yourself to putting all of your being into - and more importantly, have refined for years, for you are your own greatest critic. It is that important to you that the pain is hardly any sort of deterrent. Still, you allow yourself the happy little indulgence of complaining about it. You wouldn’t have much fun otherwise, now would you?

You can see every last inch of your home-slash-workplace - it is as much a part of you as the body you inhabit, the stone and metal of the walls and floors and ceilings are your skin, each divet another eye, and so forth. In the off-hours you like to sit and watch the deep sea flora and fauna dance their pecular routines, so distant from any other life. You’re doing so now, while you wait; a sea spider, all harsh angles and spines and heavy, calculated steps, much like yourself, grazes upon some lightly luminescent algae. It is serene. The weight of the gift that being situated so far from anything else, where you can do as you wish without being seen as an obstruction, is not lost on you, but it is one of the few freedoms you do have, and you cherish it.

The rest of your attention for about the past hour and a half has been set upon a visitor, who is currently only one chamber away from you - in the room that, if one would only look past all the embellishings and compromises forced by the medium you work in, is little more than a set of a few simple puzzles, the kind that someone could find in a newspaper; this room is intended to be something of a break before the final chamber, a moment of respite for those who have prevailed this far. The visitor has been taking this all very leisurely, upon entering each new trial has so far taken a moment to sit down, catch their breath, and observe everything around them. Someone who has already well acquainted themselves with puzzles, perhaps? An aficionado, you think they’re called. Their graceful ballet through your work, labyrinths and invisible bridges, flooded halls and shrouded hills, only one of the configurations you have made available for access, has been, you would admit, entertaining, the triumphs well-earned and the celebrations appearing heartfelt. That is all you ever wanted.

When the time comes, the visitor saunters through the cobbled archway and is visible to you through your own eyes. They are slight, clad for warmth, none too exhausted physically nor mentally, hands casually stuffed in pockets as they crane their neck to once again take in their immediate surroundings - the room is huge, open, oblong, various plates and levers and chutes and whatnot dotted around. You give them their space, they wander in curved lines and inspect cracks, tiles, floral growths, light fixtures with sight and touch, freeze and locate with their hands this and that noise from the dreams of the Earth, everything so precise, would possibly parse as though they had somehow built the whole place themselves. Their thoughtfulness continues in a comfortable haze, eventually extends to you; they approach you with that same coolness, look you up and down, facial expression reading something like ‘bigger than I thought’, and they wave pleasantly.

You nod at them. Even the smallest action you take requires the excavation of some invisible heap, a mound at a landfill, like your core is weighed down with steel. Your words are slow too, approximating out-of-breath stiltedness without of course your requirement of breath; you say, "Do you wish to proceed?"

"Sure." Like they've been asked if they want a piece of a friend's meal. They click their tongue.

You raise an arm and waft it in a slow wave from right to left; the tiled floor, not unlike a chessboard you suppose, save for the all red-ish sandstone material, but you would swear that your actual reference point was 'bathroom floor', rises before you, each cube of footing shifts, like a carousel of little interest, transporting the visitor back to the far end of the room near where they entered. You snap your fingers (or, perform at least the rough motion, since you never learned how) and a faint gray barrier surrounds the tile they are on.

You begin, voice next to them through the ripples of the air, "The final challenge, for you, is something of a memory puzzle. Your objective is to exit through the archway behind me" - you gesture, helpfully - "without me being able to reach you. You may locomote at any speed you so wish. You also are not obligated to move at any given time. There are few rules, thus: you may only move when you are talking, or otherwise conveying. You may only communicate in progressively lengthening sentences; that is, the first sentence must have one word, the second must have two, the third three, and so on. You must tell a relatively coherent story with what you convey - although, should you reach the end in the middle of a sentence, there is no need for you to finish it, though I certainly would like you to. You may not directly interact with me, and touching me whilst you are moving counts as me reaching you, thus ending your attempt - you may, however, indirectly hinder me, for instance by putting something in my path, or by manipulating the field in any way you find possible. At the end of every sentence, I may take a number of steps - not that I will move a number of tiles - equal to the words of that sentence, though I am not required to. For instances where I am not walking, for instance climbing, I will move an amount that is roughly equivalent in expenditure for me. You do not have to raise your voice, I will be able to understand you no matter where you are. Is all of that clear?"

"Yep." They are straightening their arms and legs out wide, one after the other, rolling shoulders. They press a hand on the sides of the barrier they are incased in, appear quietly satisfied.

"There are various clarifications for rules." You try to not sound too eager about all the gradual refinement you've done. "You getting lost in the middle of a sentence, stammering, going 'um' and 'uh' will not work against your word count - although you must stay in place until you finish, though there is no time limit. Worded onomatopoeia, various other vocal exclamations such as the ones previously mentioned, do count as single words, if for instance they are used in the context of dialogue or general description. Single words used in place of simile, for instance 'windlike', count only as one word, and so you are permitted to be as creative as you like. Contractions count as single words. Use of any language, including cant, as well as using multiple languages is permitted. And, finally; yes, I will be pleased if you decide to utilize a word or phrase that you favor. You can also take a break if you ever need to, for catching your breath or any other reason, just let me know in your head. Do you have any other questions?"

"Nope." They yawn.

"Very well. You may begin." You raise your fingers and then lower them, and the barrier falls below the stones.

The visitor cracks their knuckles. Deep breath. They start: "Oisín." They do not move. Quizzical, you take a step directly towards them, your body espousing no modesty in how it reminds you how much you're going to hurt later. "My name." They still remain still. You approach. "My dad's, too." Much the same. Three steps towards them, the sprawl of the chamber suffocating. "My home is Castleisland." Now do they move, heading directly for a lever. You approach. "Not much can be said." The lever is pulled, a staircase is formed by some of the tiles. You tilt your head and continue in a straight path. "About me, or my entire history." They scramble up the stairs, survey everything in a hurried fashion. "That is, save for this one thing." Down again, finding a button on the floor. Some of the tiles rotate, neither hindering nor progressing anything. "It was winter, dull as all of them." With a mad scientist's glee, they rush and begin to craft a veritable labyrinth with raised platforms and descended tiles. "There was a red light in a nearby field. I could just about see it from my bedroom window. It was like the glow from an old, mistreated, dysfunctional fireplace. Familiar, comforting, but makes you wonder if you're not torturing the thing. To say I had no choice but to investigate would be simply tautology. Weepy skies, distant shrieks, and hateful winds wasted no time sabotaging my burgeoning journey." They have, by now, more or less encased the entire playing area with a haphazardly constructed maze, and have managed to climb up onto the walls, heading towards the exit. You leap up and block their path, and regret it.

"Still, the light beckoned, pulled me under common sense like a rip tide, drowned me. Strangest, where I expected it to drag on, before I could blink I was already there. I had expected to uncover, at first, something bizarre, once in a lifetime, a meteorite, or similar." You are led on a chaotic chase, seeming to at no time be standing on the same level as them. "Nothing I saw seemed to indicate that, so I toned down my thoughts, it must be a flare. Cleaving down premature wheat stalks, the time only passed to quietly tell me of the ache in my arms. The blood trickling from my fingertips blended in with the graveyard mist of light, could it be coming from elsewhere? Carry on, little thing, said the voice in the wind, one that perhaps I had myself given it, anything for company. I swayed around, drunkenly, hunting a source, a crack in the clouds where the red light poured in, found nothing but emptiness." You catch sight of one of the other inhabitants of the structure, a fuzzy teal inchworm lookalike. It looks up at you, then at the visitor, then back at you, with a mute flourish that cries, 'I think you should just concede.'

"Naught between the crops, nary any evidence atop the dirt, what else was there for me to do but dig, hunt for closure? The cynic I had long since germinated within my mind rationalized that if nothing else it would get me back to bed sooner, safe. Who lends a shovel to a mad man who seeks to dig straight down, he opined, and lets him deprive the gravediggers their only livelihoods? Your hands will do, your hands will do, your hands will do, and for all the terrors hidden in soil I could not find resistance within." There are ramps leading up to near the glass skylight. At this point you have no honest idea how you're going to come back from this. "The mud covered me and was cemented with sweat, I tore pock marks into the field, wildly gouged earthen flesh like a fox does to a hare. I hit inerrable gray stone before I came upon anything close to mesmerizing red, and the cynic grabbed me by the throat, dragged me out of the pit. I was on my way back home by the time I had thought to remove the evidence of my trespassing, reasoned that I would rather be scolded than consumed. My sleep from there on was easy, deep, dreamless, rejuvenating, and though when I woke I feverishly checked if the light still remained, its absence did little to wound me." Ah, so close. You're barely two steps away from them. They wave in a way that's too darling to be cute, catch their breath, twirl almost a full circle.

"Truly, the only response I could muster was that it was weird, and I did not even vocalize such, for what was the point dwelling on a memory only I had? An isolated incident, no effects positive nor negative to be reported on, and I had at this point slapped myself on the wrist for ever thinking I was treading on the forbidden. In the moment I had convinced myself that the events were soon to be totally forgotten, and I carried on with my regular business with no further irregularities, quite the anticlimactic anecdote, no? In truth, the real slice of curiosity came after, in the following days of winter, and as with all history arguably leading up to this very moment, though I admit it is still unimpressive. I could not tell you precisely where I was at the next rung of my recollections, other than I was outside and it was sunny, cold of course, but the specifics do not matter much."

You are trying so desperately to keep track of both them and their story that you are swept over by a deluge of water. It's one of the more fun mechanics you installed into this puzzle, both from your perspective and the visitors you have had in the past, but somehow you forgot. You do not need reminding how much it hurts.

"There are many things that one can witness while on even a leisurely stroll, and many more that will be missed, and very rarely because of a lack of effort, such is the mischief of mystery. A forest can have its many species of tree, bush, fern, what have you, named and categorized should one be well in their research, yet the identities of all the mosses, fungi, lichens may remain beyond notice. I was not searching for anything, actively or subconsciously, I insist, there was time to be killed, so into the woods I wandered, stopping here and there to soak in the fresh air, eyes weary about the clouds. Gray up above scarcely foretells of good fortune ahead, be it from smoke or rain, and if present can drain the pleasantness from any otherwise riveting accompaniment, though as I discovered, to my bewilderment, it is not without rival. There was a rainbow, not at all faint around the ends, even as it was concealed by the horizon I could picture it as a full circle, all colors so striking it convinced me fully of synesthesia: an overwhelming taste. Eventually, as fate would have it, I focused on individual bands of color, each so distant and more real than any paints I have ever been able to obtain, especially the red, like a cherry from a garden fed by ambrosia. My synapses reacted like a sucker punch, tricks of the light, that was it, that was what it was all along, and I remembered all those other peculiarities, ball lightning, ghost lights, parhelions and paraselenes, ice blink, even the aurorae made sense! Which is all to say: it didn't, not one tiny bit, and the cynic crawled out of his hovel and slapped me for being a plagiarist, but I was not at liberty to cease being driven by being vindicated for my horrid whims. I was nearly utterly crushed under a liberating weight, almost happy to carry on like a ticking metronome for the rest of my life because I could see that the thing I had seen was explainable after all, I could escape the sanatoriums forever."

It is like being an Olympic swimmer (not that you would know), so self-confident, and all of a sudden being challenged to an aquatic time trial by someone you somehow did not notice was a sailfish.

"But then, the paradox, go big or go home, or the first one's the best, on my knees, alone in the forest, I pondered if I shouldn't after all follow the trails set out before me, but now with new purpose and a healthier outlet. Really, the biggest revolution of that day was that passion was astonishingly easy to mistake for madness, like identical cousins, the cynic, for the first time, provided something insightful, told me that perhaps the latter shouldn't be considered the evil twin of the pair, after all. You could have ended up happy either way, he remarked with a giggle, and left me to my devices, my dreaminess took me posthaste to the attic above my bedroom, where all the books we had collected over the years had gone on vacation at one time. They had since decided to stay indefinitely with the intent to retire, but little did they know that one day I would have the urge to delve in there, surely, my reason was, a however many greats grandparent must have been studious, enough to hand something interesting down. My hunch was proven so resoundingly that I briefly considered tossing everything aside, fleeing from my home with my possessions in a bag, and starting up a career as some sort of performer with extraordinary powers of prediction, future sight for very drab pieces of personal minutiae, and such."

You contemplate the meaning of 'showing off'.

"Well, all this is to say, and I really do hate to waffle on-" You don't hate this, which is the worst part. "-about myself, anything akin to aggrandizing of the self is beyond my nature, alas this is the only way I know how to relate how I gained my particular skill set, though perhaps it explains itself. I studied, no matter what other obligations threatened to throw a boulder onto the tracks, and when the old books were exhausted of their wisdom I asked around, became a one man flock to libraries, book stores, relieving myself of a quite frankly irresponsible amount of money and free bedroom space. Alas, despite my own enthusiasm, I confess that it is easy for anyone to assume where the rest of this rambling goes, so for the sake of respecting your time I will summarize myself as succinctly as I can, where my promises can be guaranteed to be still just a touch verbose. My quest for understanding of these phenomena devoured years, brought me to tributaries of incidental information that fed on the scraps, and upon reaching the sprawling, glistening delta I had been solely prophesizing of, I found the answer I was satisfied with, and hope shall satisfy you: the world is weird and wonderful."

At the end of it all, you and the visitor are about five of you-sized paces away from one another. They are standing, beaming, in the exit hallway. You consider the… well, what would the word even be, at this point? 'State,' enunciated so viscously that you get across an ambiguous but nonetheless sufficiently exasperated enough idea? The state, of the room. It is as though something much larger than you saw your cutesy Lego project and then accidentally dropped a bunch of the bricks from its own onto it. You do not kid yourself, you are not upset at all, but the severity of the ass-kicking you just received makes you forget yourself and almost cry out, 'How am I going to clean this all up?!' as though the very nature of what you are suggests the impossible is possible. There is an unplaceable neatness to the haphazardness, like a Rubik's cube with all its segments half-turned, all the struts and beams are just long enough for the purposes they were used for - long jumps, wall climbing, falling without winding one's self, gaining or denying vantage, hell, they even recreated a gag of opening an elevator door to see someone you don't like and then nonchalantly closing the door again. You lost track of the story somewhere in the… middle, you would guess? You don't really know how to ask if they can catch you up without sounding totally insane.

It's never better than when you're outmatched. Smiling in the way that only you can, you imagine capturing the image of the carnage and slapping a painted steam train on it, passing it off as a lost Magritte, and retiring from the profits. Oh, wait.

"I swear I got lost a few times in there," groans the visitor, amidst some sort of de-stressing yoga pose - one they apparently do not need, judging by how completely fine they are even after running and leaping the equivalent of a marathon.

"My word." It's all you can say. Every time you think you've gotten over it, you get lost in thought again. Maybe you should make a new puzzle in case someone has a literature degree?

"Well, uh-" They run a hand up the border of the archway, jolting around, looking for something. "Did I do it? Should I, just-" They point down the pathway further down the exit.

"My…" Oh, to hell with it. You nod. They scurry away like they've just played the funniest prank in the world on you. You are inclined to agree.

"He never tells you how to feel, or more surprisingly, when."

II

A curious side effect of all of the sculpting you have done is just how the strange rules of light portray the sea with a myriad of illusions, sometimes merely depending on what angle you look at it. For instance, in the gardens, when you look up the sea appears green. You have frightened yourself many a time, having not quite woken up at the time you looked out of one of the windows, and there all of a sudden all of the water is a deep blood red. You hope the fog never clears, it helps to keep you limber.

You do wish that you could ask it to cool off sometimes, however. It's smothering you, pulling at your memories and dangling the unease of déjà vu in front of you on a string, just enough out of reach that you cannot make the apparent connections. Half of you is trying to tempt you into playing an arcane version of connect the dots. How embarrassing.

Another visitor has arrived today, and the slightly absurd way they are going about solving the puzzles presented is a source for some of this disconnect. Now, you watch them get to the end of the Sequence Puzzle - the one where there are twenty or so individual small puzzles in the room, and some have to be solved to gain the pieces that enable one to complete another - placing a small cube on the right bowl of a set of scales. The door opens, and they are free to continue; but, aside from a quick glance, they set about exploring every crevice they can find in the room, pulling on various pieces of scenery as though looking for the entry in the bookcase that will reveal the secret passageway. It is not uncommon, especially in this room, for visitors to explore in this fashion - it is commonly done before, or during the puzzle solving process, that this occurs. Mentally panning out another technique they could have used, perhaps? You did intentionally make these puzzles so that they could be solved in many ways; some don't even need to be physically altered or interacted with in any way. You certainly won't pry; but it takes one to know one, and it strikes you as strange, doubly so when they start trying to climb up to reach for the ceiling.

Potentially influenced, subconsciously, you peer upwards. You see a hermit crab scuttling along the sea floor. It looks very… snug, cozy, words you do not get to use often. On occasion you wonder if you wouldn't benefit from shedding your petrified shell, letting whatever squishy core resides within you pour out so you can craft a new one that doesn't come close to shattering every time you bump into a wall. Or maybe the thing you need is whatever mollusks are doing in secret that lets them live completely unimpeded for over five hundred years.

And then you unexpectedly remember Do The Mario. You do not swing your arms from side to side, because you know better.

Then there is the visitor, again. That déjà vu is thrumming. They are cutting through a panoramic jigsaw puzzle like a stand-up comedian does through good will. You would never demean someone who enjoys puzzles as much as you, but you are beginning to suspect that the only person who can explain why this is looking so familiar to you is the visitor themself. You've never seen them before. You can see everything in this place, can do so all the time, from every vantage, so you would notice if something were off, surely. No hidden candid camera tricks.

They approach while you are deep in existential thought. To your discomfort, they stand perfectly still on a tile that is directly in front of you, so far away. Someone with that level of acuity, you would think they would know by now that you can hear them from all the way over there, so what is it? You sigh, mist drifts out of you and illuminates the dust swimming around. Pull yourself together.

"Are you ready?" you utter, half a Sisyphean effort.

"Leeeet's just get on with it," they chime, almost a song, eery.

"As you wish." Okay, if not the whole job, pull at least some of yourself together. "The final challenge is as such. Your objective is to exit through the archway behind me without me being able to reach you. You may locomote at any speed you so wish. You also are not obligated to move at any given time. There are few rules, thus: you-"

"It's the triangular number story challenge, right? I love those ones. Constrained prose is so fun!"

The bounciness is there in the voice, but unknowably it seems like a stale lie. "Do you n-"

"Nope!"

You now notice you did not construct the barrier while explaining the rules, as per your routine. You count yourself fortunate that the connection between you and the architecture isn't overtly direct, as the whole place would be crumbling to pieces, or at least shuddering like there's an earthquake going on. You are all at once too tired to do this today. It is then sad that you are too polite to leave.

"Dáirine. My name. My mum's, too. My home is Castleisland." You are so stricken that you do not move an inch. You never thought that someone's lack of action could appear so familiar. No eyes are on you, are they? None of your friends are pulling this off as some kind of elaborate birthday surprise, right? You wonder if you have a birthday.

"Not much can be said. About me, or my entire history. That is, save for this one thing. It was winter, dull as all of them. There was a red light in a nearby field. I could just about see it from my bedroom window." You decide it would be unsporting to sit there completely dazed, so you quickly count the words and shamble forwards. The whole weight of the ocean is atop you. "It was like the glow from an old, mistreated, dysfunctional fireplace. Familiar, comforting, but makes you wonder if you're not torturing the thing. To say I had no choice but to investigate would be simply tautology." Your better instincts tell you something about a gift horse and its mouth; it's the rare opportunity of a do-over, and by the sheer power of coincidence - it's probably just a popular story, right? - you can come into this with some prior preparation. You know how not to succeed (you use the word loosely here, since in an ideal world everyone who comes through would prosper) and can use that to your advantage. You begin a maneuver to corner them before they can best you.

"Weepy skies, distant shrieks, and hateful winds wasted no time sabotaging my burgeoning journey. Still, the light beckoned, pulled me under common sense like a rip tide, drowned me. Strangest, where I expected it to drag on, before I could blink I was already there. I had expected to uncover, at first, something bizarre, once in a lifetime, a meteorite, or similar." You are beginning to understand why the most common act of defiance of a character in a horror movie against the antagonist is to try and slow it down by knocking things over; it's sure as anything working perfectly on you. "Nothing I saw seemed to indicate that, so I toned down my thoughts, it must be a flare. Cleaving down premature wheat stalks, the time only passed to quietly tell me of the ache in my arms. The blood trickling from my fingertips blended in with the graveyard mist of light, could it be coming from elsewhere? Carry on, little thing, said the voice in the wind, one that perhaps I had myself given it, anything for company." This time around, you're in the middle of a maelstrom of shifting ramps and converging streams. They haven't ever been any more than three steps away from you by the end of your allotted movement. "I swayed around, drunkenly, hunting a source, a crack in the clouds where the red light poured in, found nothing but emptiness. Naught between the crops, nary any evidence atop the dirt, what else was there for me to do but dig, hunt for closure? The cynic I had long since germinated within my mind rationalized that if nothing else it would get me back to bed sooner, safe. Who lends a shovel to a mad man who seeks to dig straight down, he opined, and lets him deprive the gravediggers their only livelihoods?" You hit your head on a levitating marble sphere, and from there everything just melds together.

"Your hands will do, your hands will do, your hands will do, and for all the terrors hidden in soil I could not find resistance within. The mud covered me and was cemented with sweat, I tore pock marks into the field, wildly gouged earthen flesh like a fox does to a hare. I hit inerrable gray stone before I came upon anything close to mesmerizing red, and the cynic grabbed me by the throat, dragged me out of the pit. I was on my way back home by the time I had thought to remove the evidence of my trespassing, reasoned that I would rather be scolded than consumed. My sleep from there on was easy, deep, dreamless, rejuvenating, and though when I woke I feverishly checked if the light still remained, its absence did little to wound me.

"Truly, the only response I could muster was that it was weird, and I did not even vocalize such, for what was the point dwelling on a memory only I had? An isolated incident, no effects positive nor negative to be reported on, and I had at this point slapped myself on the wrist for ever thinking I was treading on the forbidden. In the moment I had convinced myself that the events were soon to be totally forgotten, and I carried on with my regular business with no further irregularities, quite the anticlimactic anecdote, no? In truth, the real slice of curiosity came after, in the following days of winter, and as with all history arguably leading up to this very moment, though I admit it is still unimpressive. I could not tell you precisely where I was at the next rung of my recollections, other than I was outside and it was sunny, cold of course, but the specifics do not matter much. There are many things that one can witness while on even a leisurely stroll, and many more that will be missed, and very rarely because of a lack of effort, such is the mischief of mystery.

"A forest can have its many species of tree, bush, fern, what have you, named and categorized should one be well in their research, yet the identities of all the mosses, fungi, lichens may remain beyond notice. I was not searching for anything, actively or subconsciously, I insist, there was time to be killed, so into the woods I wandered, stopping here and there to soak in the fresh air, eyes weary about the clouds. Gray up above scarcely foretells of good fortune ahead, be it from smoke or rain, and if present can drain the pleasantness from any otherwise riveting accompaniment, though as I discovered, to my bewilderment, it is not without rival. There was a rainbow, not at all faint around the ends, even as it was concealed by the horizon I could picture it as a full circle, all colors so striking it convinced me fully of synesthesia: an overwhelming taste.

"Eventually, as fate would have it, I focused on individual bands of color, each so distant and more real than any paints I have ever been able to obtain, especially the red, like a cherry from a garden fed by ambrosia. My synapses reacted like a sucker punch, tricks of the light, that was it, that was what it was all along, and I remembered all those other peculiarities, ball lightning, ghost lights, parhelions and paraselenes, ice blink, even the aurorae made sense! Which is all to say: it didn't, not one tiny bit, and the cynic crawled out of his hovel and slapped me for being a plagiarist, but I was not at liberty to cease being driven by being vindicated for my horrid whims. I was nearly utterly crushed under a liberating weight, almost happy to carry on like a ticking metronome for the rest of my life because I could see that the thing I had seen was explainable after all, I could escape the sanatoriums forever. But then, the paradox, go big or go home, or the first one's the best, on my knees, alone in the forest, I pondered if I shouldn't after all follow the trails set out before me, but now with new purpose and a healthier outlet. Really, the biggest revolution of that day was that passion was astonishingly easy to mistake for madness, like identical cousins, the cynic, for the first time, provided something insightful, told me that perhaps the latter shouldn't be considered the evil twin of the pair, after all.

"You could have ended up happy either way, he remarked with a giggle, and left me to my devices, my dreaminess took me posthaste to the attic above my bedroom, where all the books we had collected over the years had gone on vacation at one time. They had since decided to stay indefinitely with the intent to retire, but little did they know that one day I would have the urge to delve in there, surely, my reason was, a however many greats grandparent must have been studious, enough to hand something interesting down. My hunch was proven so resoundingly that I briefly considered tossing everything aside, fleeing from my home with my possessions in a bag, and starting up a career as some sort of performer with extraordinary powers of prediction, future sight for very drab pieces of personal minutiae, and such.

"Well, all this is to say, and I really do hate to waffle on about myself, anything akin to aggrandizing of the self is beyond my nature, alas this is the only way I know how to relate how I gained my particular skill set, though perhaps it explains itself. I studied, no matter what other obligations threatened to throw a boulder onto the tracks, and when the old books were exhausted of their wisdom I asked around, became a one man flock to libraries, book stores, relieving myself of a quite frankly irresponsible amount of money and free bedroom space. Alas, despite my own enthusiasm, I confess that it is easy for anyone to assume where the rest of this rambling goes, so for the sake of respecting your time I will summarize myself as succinctly as I can, where my promises can be guaranteed to be still just a touch verbose. My quest for understanding of these phenomena devoured years, brought me to tributaries of incidental information that fed on the scraps, and upon reaching the sprawling, glistening delta I had been solely prophesizing of, I found the answer I was satisfied with, and hope shall satisfy you: the world is weird and wonderful."

More days than not, you fit snugly into the assumption that you really just are not capable of anger. Five paces of difference proves otherwise. They're smiling so glibly, like this was deserved.

"That was… impressive," you whisper. All your vision is focused on them, trying to pierce.

"Thanks! I really love your work." Like a brick wall that opaquely hates you.

"I think it was very clever, how you scantly used contractions, to artificially extend the length of sentences, particularly towards the end."

"It's easy being tricksy," they chirp, trying much too heartily to force a rhyme.

"You have earned your prize. Farewell." Against every inclination you have to go and lie down for a very long time, you linger. They shine like an execution by bonfire and wiggle away down the corridor.

Days and days, and days and days; more and more, and more and more. You're getting a little bit better at retaining connections.

"Ráichéal. Pádraigín. Gofraidh. Dónal. Feidhlimidh. Brónach. Étaín."

The sap boils within you.

"My name. My dad's, too."

A whirlpool around your mind.

"My name. My mum's, too."

On the one hand, you cannot shake the notion that it is a fairly reliable method to learn a technique for solving a puzzle by viewing a guide. You yourself are a preferentially visual learner.

"My home is Castleisland."

They come in waves, as if by committee, and you dare to wonder just how many people just so happen to have petrified wood lying around.

“Not much can be said. About me, or my entire history.”

They manage to find holes and cracks in places that you didn’t consider they could show up in, and for that you suppose you are thankful. You would be crushed if everything were laid to waste.

“That is, save for this one thing.”

You’re quite simple, per your own opinion. You love puzzles, so you made some puzzles, accessible by everyone, in theory. Honestly, the gimmick of finding the place was only put there because of how long the days get for you.

“Do you hold such little respect for me?”

You hiss the question in a manner most unbecoming of yourself. You leer at the umpteenth visitor of the past few weeks through an antenna, woven from your own fossilized sinew, breaking out of the ground in front of your home. This close up you can see discomfort in their features, but only from having a wooden worm assail them. You trace rings around them, holding a green spotlight on them.

They are clutching something in their hand, which you discover to be a rose gold mobile phone. You need not look at the screen. “Is there maintenance going on?” they ask, failing to chuckle the tension away.

“Do you understand that this relies upon mutual input?” Rising over them like a plume of volcanic ash.

“Are you, like, vetting now?”

“I am not, there has merely been a small revision.” Dangerously, invasively close to their face. “The halls are not open, so you may attempt this alternative.” You temper the spite in your voice when you see them shrink. “All you must do to claim your prize is tell a story.”

“A-any story?” The hope, the nerve, is unforgivable.

“There are only two rules, speak in triangular numbers, and make it unique.” You slither most of the tendril back down into the vent you burst from, lamp-eye about level with their head. Five paces away, you notice. “You may begin, or not, the freedom is yours to do… whatever, whenever, wherever.”

You are not good with high speeds, experiencing them or processing them. Their trembling is replaced in the flash of a blast furnace, their resolve cast in steel. They take in an operatic breath.

“Pnbyna. Zl anzr. Zl qnq’f, gbb. Zl ubzr vf Pnfgyrvfynaq. Abg zhpu pna or fnvq. Nobhg zr, be zl ragver uvfgbel. Gung vf, fnir sbe guvf bar guvat. Vg jnf jvagre, qhyy nf nyy bs gurz. Gurer jnf n erq yvtug va n arneol svryq. V pbhyq whfg nobhg frr vg sebz zl orqebbz jvaqbj. Vg jnf yvxr gur tybj sebz na byq, zvfgerngrq, qlfshapgvbany svercynpr. Snzvyvne, pbzsbegvat, ohg znxrf lbh jbaqre vs lbh’er abg gbeghevat gur guvat. Gb fnl V unq ab pubvpr ohg gb vairfgvtngr jbhyq or fvzcyl gnhgbybtl. Jrrcl fxvrf, qvfgnag fuevrxf, naq ungrshy jvaqf jnfgrq ab gvzr fnobgntvat zl ohetrbavat wbhearl. Fgvyy, gur yvtug orpxbarq, chyyrq zr haqre pbzzba frafr yvxr n evc gvqr, qebjarq zr. Fgenatrfg, jurer V rkcrpgrq vg gb qent ba, orsber V pbhyq oyvax V jnf nyernql gurer. V unq rkcrpgrq gb hapbire, ng svefg, fbzrguvat ovmneer, bapr va n yvsrgvzr, n zrgr-”

“Excuse me, might I just, for a moment, interrupt you to earnestly speak my mind?”

“Go ahead?” Stage fright.

Your stalk flashes a bright light in their eyes, and you send them away with the victor’s reward - but not before giving them an improper Irish goodbye: “Fuck off forever.”

“I’d be all over you like stink on doo-doo.”

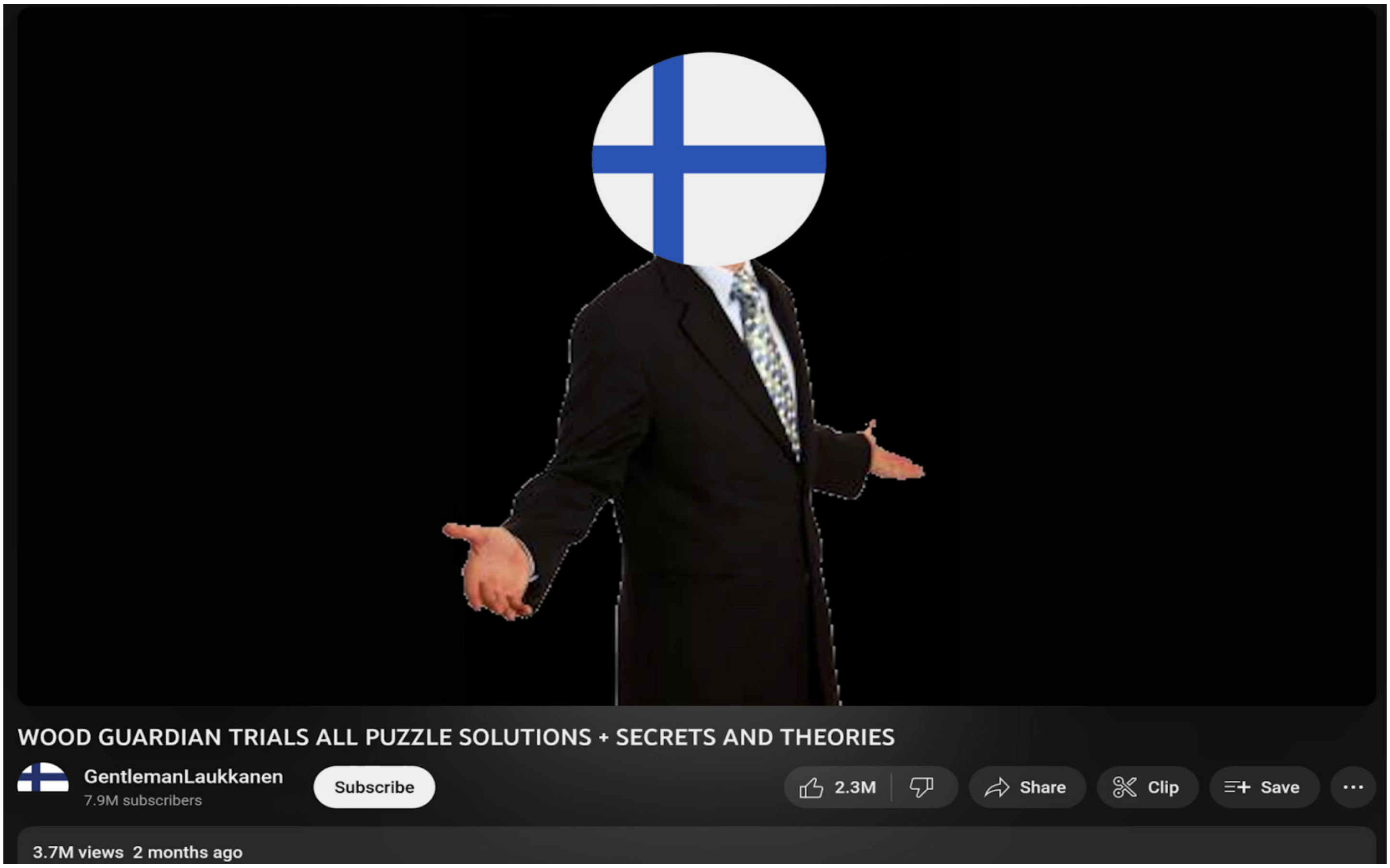
III

Regrettably, you have found time to wander around. You have closed your operations down for the time being, a respite that has long since merely been necessary. You found the courage to admit to yourself that you do not manage - nor express - anger well, the laughably simple reason being that you do not experience it enough to know how to identify it, let alone let it cool. The truth is, there is only one thing that makes you fall into rage: confusion, or more accurately, you get angry at yourself for being confused and not knowing how to fix it.

Many of the critters you share a space with are taking advantage of the lack of traffic, unrusting their stagnant bodies in much the same way you are. It is, for anyone who isn’t you, easy to forget how many idyllic and bizarre families live down here. For now, you are only peeking your head into each room, reasoning that you might as well check for anyone who might have snuck in, or to fix anything that needs fixing. You trail around the circuit and lunglessly breathe.

There are many reaches of your workplace that, until recently, were predominately unknown to the world at large. One of the few sanctums that still remains available to you is your rest room, a spacious, once beloved chamber where you sleep, engage in personal recreation, sustain yourself, and attempt through the uncertainty to survive, since the cherished privilege of living without thinking about is ill-afforded to you. You have a bed that was a nightmare to craft and an apocalypse to find a mattress big enough for the frame and durable enough for your body; silicate splinters meet foam and address it as a pincushion. Amongst other amenities you require, you have a computer - a fact that surprises many, or likely not these days - and you have taken the necessary precautions for using it: you have calmed down, and you know you have absolutely nothing better to do.

It is through this that you discover the reason every person with five minutes to waste knows your address is because of a person who advertises themself like this:



WOOD GUARDIAN TRIALS ALL PUZZLE SOLUTIONS + SECRETS AND THEORIES

GentlemanLaukkanen
7.9M subscribers

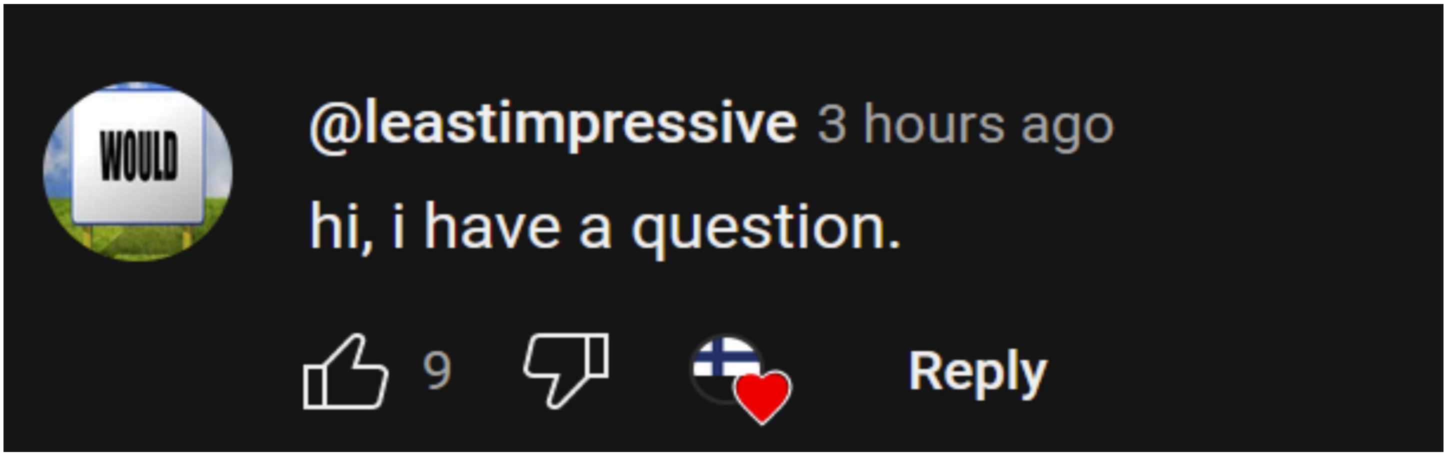
3.7M views 2 months ago

You do not get eye strain, obviously, but over the course of watching the thirty-six minute video - numerous poses of a businessman with a Finnish flag for a head accompanying the whole lot - and through only skimming, you see GoPro footage of their perceived version of the entire process required to access your puzzles; announced at the top in a performative wail of "HELLO JURY!" they showcase them obtaining a piece of petrified wood, flipping it like a coin (not at all part of it), wishing for 'a conundrum' (that's all it takes), giving the exact coordinates to your front door (is that exactly useful information? Is anyone planning on physically trekking down to the bottom of the ocean near Antarctica?), passing the pair of guards where one tells lies and the other tells truths, poring over every surface in your home like a prospector seeking a diamond in the rough.

The jigsaw puzzles. The cute daily crosswords that you come up with at the crack of dawn, every day. The water level puzzles. The invisible bridge. Not once do they cover the fact that these are not at all the only chambers available, each experience is tailored to the individual. All the way down to their story - which, to their credit, they did write themself - everything is documented. The deep sea wildlife, many of which are being captured on film for the first time in history, are poked and prodded at, the commentator pleads, "Why is it keeping all of these creatures hidden?" The insinuation that "this is the PREMIER guide for beating this game." Never mind the fact that if they were so curious about 'what it all means,' they were standing five paces away from you and could have just asked.

It's back again, that rambunctious confusion, pecking at those few expressive parts of you, daring them to flare up. Much of the rest of the showing is… well, you confess that maybe this just is not your 'cup of tea,' but you are just not able to make the connections that are being presented, even with a continent of grains of salt. Kaleidoscopic is the word you would use for its flow. Smeared, you would say if you were less polite.

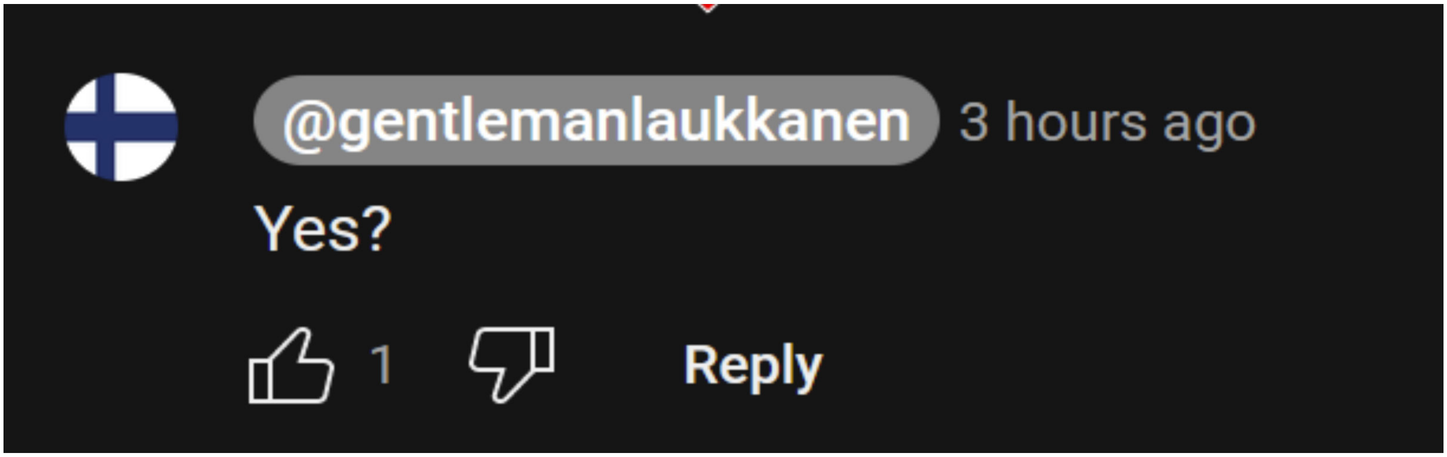
You do not stick with the video long enough to get to their full explanation of why you live in a house, and their theories about what forms your house will take in the future. You instead dust off another state that you do not indulge often: mischief. You just leave them a comment.



@leastimpressive 3 hours ago

hi, i have a question.

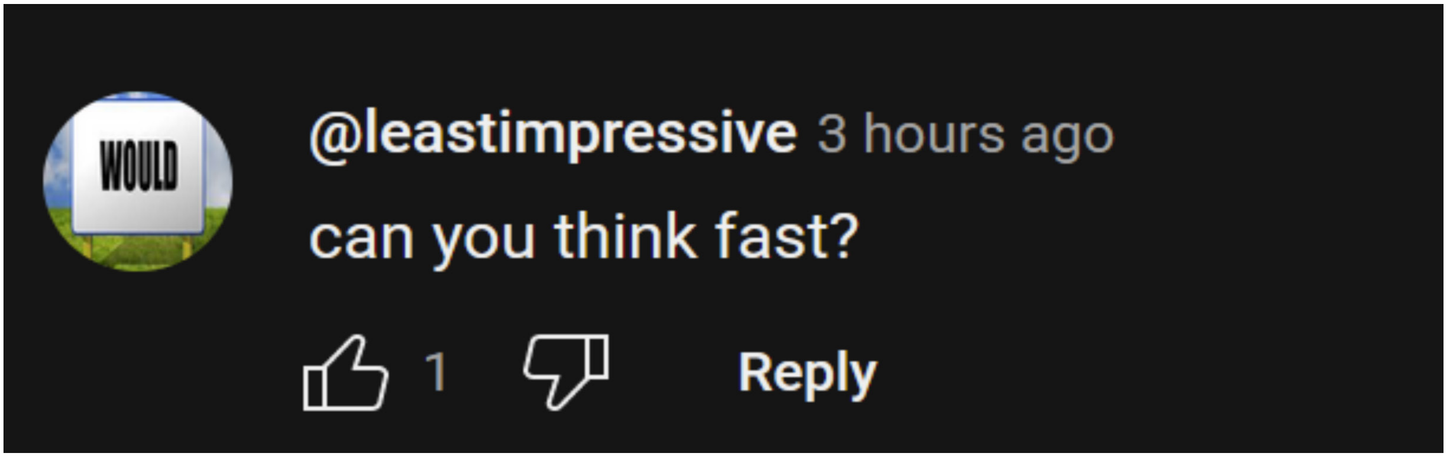
Hook.



@gentlemanlaukkanen 3 hours ago

Yes?

Line.



@leastimpressive 3 hours ago

can you think fast?

Flashbang.

gettyimages
Credit: cenkerdem
828810772

Oops. You had only intended to brighten their computer screen to frightening levels, but somehow you ended up blowing up their whole set-up, you sense. You shrink away from a prescience thatis not shared by your counterpart. Perhaps it's a sign that you're irresponsibly out of practice with mischief, or worse, misunderstanding the concept entirely.

Who knows?

TAKE FUCKING WHATEVER

by Tulips

So I just take it from the top? I wasn't expecting that my commentary would really be needed, it mostly speaks for itself. Sure.

We had just finished up a live performance of Car Seat Headrest, which is a really weird thing to have on a late night talk show, but you know, happens, I guess. We cut to break, came back, and she was already on set doing casual banter with JC. I set up the camera, the applause sign behind us turns on, and we're rolling.

An Evening with Cyan Acryl

Cyan Acryl (she/her) is a trans woman, a gay rights activist, lesbian, autistic, "genderfucked"[1], aroace, a mental health advocate, and author. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois Urbyn-Champagne studying cognitive science.

Her research and writing is about the reflection of society on our sense of self, the social construction of the self, and the effects of ego death on the human psyche, in which she attempts to answer, or avoid answering, the question as to what a human truly is. Her book On Irrelevance will be published on August 8th by Sniler Press. This is her sixth interview on her tour.

Welcome. Thanks for your time.

Yeah, dude, I have such a packed schedule it's unreal. You really lucked out by getting me here.

Oh, I didn't realize. Sorry.

No, that was- that was a joke[2]. My bad.

Tell us a bit about yourself. How did you become an author?

Funnily enough, I didn't think that writing was the path for me. For a while I was stuck looking for jobs in film, since that's what I did my undergrad in, and nothing was really able to click. I think I started writing because of the angst that kind of came from that job search: I needed a creative outlet, because I've always wanted to make something, and- you know, it's just the easiest thing you can do.

Interesting- so all this kind of emerged after you went to school?

Right. In retrospect it's kind of funny, because I don't really feel attached to film anymore. It felt like a much more… concrete medium than writing, because it builds on good writing, or at least good narrative design, I guess? But what I really learned was that I'm more attached to telling good stories than how they're told. I mean rather than. *Laughs*

Right. So, what prompted you to write this book?

So, a while ago a bunch of me and some people I'm semi-close with decided to create this compilation of our work. If you're familiar with the concept of a zine, it's that — like, we all got together and wrote some stuff that was kind of in the vibe of our group. What interested me was that I hang around a bunch of psychotic [transgender people][3] and they all have this tendency to assert their authority over their own sense of self, violently if necessary. There were tons of submissions about that topic in the final zine, talking about the idea of becoming, about the idea of what it means to be yourself, many of which were decidedly made in this spirit of self reflection.

I found it strange, right?[4] Like, as somebody trying to de-emphasize my experiences while writing my own works, I found so many people in a trap that I found myself in. When I was writing work that was mostly about myself, I would end up constantly dwelling on my own trauma. I guess I got sick of it after a while, and so I would focus a lot more on character writing. That's what I'm doing here: I'm making up people and exploring their senses of self, or exploring the senses of self of people I already know.

So what's it about? What's the thesis?

Well, I don't want to spell the entire thing out, obviously[5] - I firmly believe in a death of the author approach to storytelling, it should be taught in like, high school. Like, with poetry, you have this massive collection of imagery and insane things that don't tend to happen in stories with a strict narrative. Subjectivity in art is one of the most important things to me. In general though, it's a collection of stuff about how we, as humans, experience identity. I hope that everybody can see a little of themself in my work, at least that's what I'm trying to get at. I tried to get a diverse range of perspectives, different issues that people have, and tried to put a little bit of everybody into it, at least ev-

-eryone I know and have the ability to speak for.

Do you believe you have the ability to speak for those people?[6]

Well, I mean… uh, in a sense, yes, because I've seen many things in my life, and I believe that I can comfortably understand a lot of these experiences. I don't mean to be, like, the kind of person on Peeper who says "I'm an empath and I can feel exactly what you feel", but I do think that I can probably talk about the topics that my book touches on.

I'm aware of the issues that come with speaking on behalf of other groups, especially the marginalized. But I firmly believe that I'm not doing that here.

What kinds of music do you listen to while writing?[7]

Honestly? *Laughs* Loud, dissonant shit. As much as I'd like to say I listen to Mozart while writing, it makes me feel pretentious, like I'm sitting on my ivory tower sipping tea looking down on the peasants. Instead, especially while writing short stories with any form of conflict, I'll listen to electronic stuff or heavy metal. Some of my friends have asked me why I do it like that, but it just makes me feel pumped, it makes the ideas flow better.

I think a lot of my work kind of hinges on me being mad about something, about wanting something to change at any cost. In that sense, I think the dissonance channels that.

So, with that kind of aggression and desire for change, you're not channeling the same kind of radical self-actualization tendencies as your peers.

It's about systemic change, not individual change.[8] It's about reshaping the world in a way that better accommodates people we don't see as "normal", as human. Like… it's about the way that mental illness acts upon us as people and what it shapes us into.

Like, for example[9], let's suppose that you're a kid lying in bed at a summer camp, and you've been having just this nightmare hell the entire time. You're lying there sitting in your bed with chiptune on your iPod, and you start spacing out, starting to delude yourself into believing you're in Sleepaway Camp. You see blood on the ceiling that says "YOU ARE TRANSGENDER".

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[1] *JC seemed pained having to read this word out, but Cyan refused to cut it from the intro.*

[2] *Notable that absolutely nobody laughed at this.*

[3] **SLUR REDACTED BY STANDARD PROCEDURE.**

[4] *The camera zoomed in on her here, while she repeatedly gestured around with her hands, waving them left and right to try and seem more evocative. She was clearly nervous, trapped like a deer in headlights, but at the time still really peppy. I mean, I've seen nervous guests, but it felt like she had something to hide.*

[5] *It got worse here. I didn't pan the camera back, because at this point it was so clear that this was an anomaly to be explored that I wanted to see what happened.*

[6] *I panned back here, mostly because JC looked absolutely perplexed. Like, to him, this is basic shit, right? The optics of "I can speak for the mentally ill", it's bad for ratings. Some audience members were a bit fidgety too, clearly shaking from the strange tension of it all, as if they couldn't just leave if they wanted anyways. This wasn't going well for her, but I don't think she noticed it at all. She was talking like there was no audience, like the audience didn't seem to matter.*

[7] *JC went straight back into ratings mode here, clearly wanting to change the subject entirely, his face scrunching up and then relaxing, almost forcing it to be exaggeratedly calm, like he just took 20 mils of propranolol. If you don't know what that is, it's called a* **[MISSING CHARACTER.]** *(beta) blocker, and you can get them from most doctors. They're really useful for panic attacks, genuinely, and they might help you a lot. Anyways, the point is that JC wasn't doing well.*

[8] *She looked positively pissed having to answer this one, and her face scrunched up a bit. It was like this was an obvious thing to her, something that her readership and JC should just get out the gate, like water being wet or a Pop-Tart being a sandwich. You know, basic stuff.*

[9] *There was a very specific tone of voice to this. "For exaaaaaaaample", almost, with the "a" being stretched out as if she was trying to be sassy, or lying a bit. Maybe she was lying to herself, a delusion that she herself was too deep into to break free from, trying to fill some void within her.*

Woah.[10]

Right. Hear me out. So you're freaked out, lying there, you can't seem to move. You're terrified, you fall asleep, you wake up, and you remember it. Was the delusion acting, or were you acting?

Because I'd say that you're the one acting, and the contention of classical psychiatry is to lean towards dehumanizing. It's why it's harder to get hormones when you're psychotic, for example, since everyone has to test you to make sure that you want to do these things first: what if it's just delusion? What if it's just a manic episode?

I think that psychiatry is a tool for stripping agency from people who we deem to be abnormal. Not to say that it's wrong for a person to believe that your mental illness affects you! But it's a way for a select group of neurotypical people to dictate the ontology of reality.

That seemed like a very specific example.

Right, well[11]. It happened to my buddy Coda. I think about him a lot.

So, on that note. Is any of your work about being transgender?

What? No. I mean... yes, but also no. If you view my work as being about being transgender, it can be, sure. But like, again, I'm really not trying to offer any insight as to me with any of this work, more trying to capture a bunch of nebulous ideas, some reflecting me, some not.

It's something that I noticed while I was on Chris's show, actually. I was asked what my work meant to me a lot, why I wrote it, trying to reflect very directly as to my book being a statement about myself. And I kind of hate the over-centralization of the self in media, where me being trans has to be the subject of my work because I'm trans. I can't just be the author, I have to be the trans author. I can't just write something that I think is neat, I have to write it because it has intense meaning, it has to be about suffering and trauma- that'll make people who haven't experienced that pain understand it, so they finally empathize and give me human rights. I can't write with both "he" and "she" nebulously referring to the same person, because obviously that's a trans allegory and not a plural one.

Plural?[12]

What? Oh, like, dissociative disorder stuff. Again, really, uh, trying to capture the breadth of mental illness here[13].

Okay. I mean, that's interesting, though. Would you be interested in sharing a poem from your book about it?

Uh, sure. Let me…[14] Yeah, this… should work.

you spun up from nothing,
floating aimlessly.
caught up in the web[15]
formed from those before you.

scared and floating,
you found yourself compared to
the shadow of those before you
without standing on your own.

comparing yourself to
mere shadows of a person
while struggling to stay upright
changed you forever.

the shadows shifted and took form.
you cried and cried,
screaming "i've changed,
and i don't even know how[16]".

you cried, and the shade embraced you.
you were given the love you deserved.
you didn't know why
you had caused hurt.

you were given compassion
from a self as in a mirror[17].
she had caused hurt,
but she was you.

that self you kind of knew
stared you down in the face
saying "i've known you all my life,
and i love you."

staring with eyes unlike a pale moon,
you replied "i'm not real"[18].
she said "i love you",
and you acquiesced in tears.

[10] *The audience seemed unnerved, but there was still some notable laughter from the back. She seemed like she didn't want them to laugh.*

[11] *Cyan fidgeted with her fingers around here, and notably paused for a bit before saying "Coda". Methinks the lady doth protest too much, like a highschooler trying to make up a friend so that their parents don't believe they're actually alone. See? That was an anecdote I actually pulled from my own experience, and I didn't pussy out about who it was from.*

[12] *I watched as Cyan jumped back into her chair, all the hairs on her back standing up, each individual hair seeming to carry its own agency. The audience mostly seemed confused, like they just heard a word that had no semantic meaning to it. I mean, we know better at this point, but fuck if I knew what it meant back then.*

[13] *She was speaking a lot faster for this line, like a fucking racehorse trying to catch up from the back of the field, or like a bride on her wedding day who has to get out to the altar to say "yes".*

[14] *She grabbed the book off JC's desk, which is weird, since she had her own copy that she was supposed to use. She flipped through the thing almost as if she didn't even know what was in it, and I zoomed in on her.*

[15] *This here is the first part that caught my eye. If we're really trying to be general here, why use something as specific as a spider analogy when you're wearing spider earrings right now?*

[16] *I know you aren't asking for literary critique or analysis, but hear me out. An excerpt from Jimmy's show a few weeks back, first interview she did in this tour:*

So you really don't actually know that much about your past self?

Yeah, I mean, it's weird, right? Like, I don't really know how to talk about myself in my work in the first place, because I feel like my memory just kind of blanks in this way I find it hard to describe. Sometimes I get told things about me in, like, college, and I just feel this primal detachment. I think it's part of the trans experience.

But the real kicker to me is that I'm obviously a very different person, and I can't really put my finger on why or how. Past me didn't leave enough clues to figure that out. So that's why none of this work really can be about me, because I don't really know me. You know?

The context shift is weird to me, here, since one of the things she's trying to use to prove that this isn't about her ends up being what she's talking about. It's like this weird angle where you- you're remembering about not remembering. Fucked up, really. You know, despite everything, I still feel bad for the girl. She didn't know what she was getting into. At least I hope not.

[17] *Maybe this is about trans dysphoria with the mirror analogy? Stuff like this is built to be ripped open like a popcorn bag, right?*

[18] *A lot of Cyan's work seems to deal with unreality. This by far isn't the only one. The internal landscape of that unreality always seems to be the same though: this transient space that permeates the same set of core concepts. It's either this infinite void, or a sandy beach, but both of them seem to be referring to the same space every time. It shows up like ten times throughout "On Irrelevance", so it's definitely gotta be something.*

you thought you weren't real,
you didn't know what to do,
but you spun your own web[19],
because you had to[20].

And, so, like, capturing the dissociative experience. A non-you entity being you. That's kind of the horror aspect of it, I guess.

This aspect of "not-you-ness" seems to show up a lot in your work. I mean, can you really fault a reader for thinking that a lot of this stuff is about you?
Yes. Yes I can, actually- I mean, this was a thing that happened a lot with Jimmy, actually. He kept trying to read into me, but it just wasn't about me. I get a lot of emails about the same topic, too, where people exert overfamiliarity[21] with me because they think that I've spilled my thought processes all over the place. Like, obviously, there's a bit of me in this work, there's a bit of any author in any work, but that doesn't mean that you can say anything about the author. You can't even say "the author wanted to write this", because under capital, that isn't even the case anymore!

Whenever I write, I imagine being in a conversation with my audience. But that's just it, it's an imagined conversation. Whenever I read, I imagine the author being in a conversation with me, but the author is imaginary, inexorably removed from the work even if mentioned directly by name. You can't actually say anything about the author[22], you can only say something about the imagined. And they don't have to coincide.

I guess the thesis of this interview is: stop fucking emailing me about stuff like this. Especially stop emailing me expressing sympathy for experiences that could happen to anybody[23]. I'm not special for having been through that[24].

So they did happen to you, then?
No, you're reading into it too hard. Sorry, I'm just- I'm tired, is all, and like…

But you just said that it did.
No, but, you see, it's the whole- remember the like, not-you-ness- I- this interview is over[25].

So. That was Cyan Acryl, then! Can we get a round of-[26]

Oh my fucking god. I can't stand you fucking late night hosts anyway! Why the fuck did I sign up for this?

All of you act like you fucking know me, like you're trying to put a goddamn power drill through my head[27], trying to stick a fucking mind control device on me so I say what you want me to. I'm fucking sick of it! You don't fucking know me. We aren't pals. I'm here for a deal my shitty agent set up[28], and now I'm blowing up my career because I am so fucking done with you people.

Wow, okay. I was just following the script, more or less[29]. I think you're really overextending the power of the late night talk show host[30].

Right. So after that, Cyan ran around behind JC before he had a chance to get a word out, and she ripped him up out of his chair, his legs not knowing how to respond. JC barely had the ability to stand up after the fact, trying to wiggle around and out like a worm in heat, while the audience and myself couldn't even muster a peep as I captured the thing with the shakiest hands I've had since my parents died in a car crash.

Cyan, on the other hand, was clearly experiencing the greatest adrenaline rush of all time, almost like she was burning through her own brain. She didn't actually have to do much, is the thing. Talk show hosts aren't trained to fight. Put JC into a choke while he barely struggled. The guy's eyes were practically spilling out of their sockets, wanting to pop like uncovered soup in a microwave, except the soup is blood and you are in hell. Poor guy's out cold before you can say "Bob's your uncle".

She didn't bother to look at me, eyes locked like a missile defense system on her designated target, a genetically engineered apex predator. I don't know who would, really, I'm a pretty unassuming guy. Surprised she bothered to keep the evidence intact though. A few videos were being recorded, actually, beyond mine, but in my humble opinion mine's by far the best. I know JC, is the thing, and so I have an excellent comprehension of how to make this scene work.

The audience began to flee, the ant colony built up in the bleachers being snapped on the floor. The other people filming were shaking from just trying to get the fuck out, no stabilization software could save them from-

You've gone on quite long enough on these tangents at this point.
Okay. So, she literally just beats the guy while unconscious, over and over, low blow after low blow. Steps on his face, kicks him in the nuts and steps on them, you know, classics, could've been a scene out of Pulp Fiction if I actually saw

[19]More fucking spiders.

[20]Panned back to the usual position here. JC looked floored, but mostly confused. I wonder if he had the same thoughts as me.

[21]Sorry.

[22]She got really passionate when saying this line, to the degree that the heat of rage in the room could cook an egg. It's clear this is something she thinks a lot about, prolly 'cause she has to.

[23]This is the thing, right? Like, let's take the idea that this work actually is about her. Wouldn't she want that sympathy? Or is she afraid of too many people knowing?

[24]And here's where our first crack forms, with the apparent pressure in Cyan's head starting to blow out steam, a burst pipe underneath the sink of a fourth-floor apartment building. JC paused here for a few seconds, and Cyan then put her own hands over her mouth, then put them back on the sides of the chair, gripping them like a stress ball. It was at this moment that she knew she fucked up.

[25]I started tracking the camera on Cyan, while the audience from the back did this cartoonish gasp, as if they knew what was about to unfold. I certainly didn't. But that didn't lessen the impact when she got up out of her chair and started storming off to the side of the stage in the middle of live TV. Fuck, I had to take the camera off the tripod mid-shot.

[26]The audience began clapping, but stopped immediately when Cyan turned back around. At this point I was fully in handheld mode, like I'm doing some found footage Blair Witch bullshit at this point. But this had to be documented, or else we wouldn't be here.

[27]Possible paranoid delusion? It does make it more clear about some other works in "On Irrelevance" though, in retrospect. A notable passage from the poem "welcome, race fans" therein:

> electricity runs down my spine
> flowing to a camera in this room
> it tells you my thoughts
> your car is right outside
> you're hiding in the closet
> you're right behind me
> i'll see you on the street
> you'll call me and i'll fade again

Yet more unfortunate evidence that she was exactly as self-centered as she really thought.

[28]Do you have anything to say about that? I guess I'm breaking the procedure by just saying that right now, but like, wow, she doesn't like you. No comment?

[29]Cyan's face on this one was near priceless. I had to capture it closer up, honestly, because she scrunched it up so incredibly hard. You almost got the sense that she was going to just wreck somebody then and there, her brow furrowing. It almost seemed like she was going to cry, but something tells me that she isn't really the kind of woman to do that.

[30]The audience laughed wildly, but a lot of them were on the edge of their seats. Suddenly this had turned from a late night talk show to a high school debate club, or even a shitty comedy sketch club.

that movie. The entire time she's screaming one thing, needing it to be heard, desperately needing it to be heard. If there was one take-away, this was it.

Which is?
"Stop acting like you fucking know me."

I suppose we know her now.
Yeah. Guess so.

stay tuned for

ROMA, ROMA

by Valerie Serac

The Roman Empire never existed. We've been fooled by a devils' alliance of old school fascist italians, wishful archeologists, and neo nazi aesthetes gathering in cold rooms to masturbate over sun-bleached marble busts of imperial pedophiles, to convince us their fantasies constitute a historical entity. They dig up crumbled villas, toilets, green glass mosaics of dead gods fucking each other in the ass and tell us it's important, crucial, that it bears a meaning carried forward by the storm of history, that we should care, that we must. Don't let them lie to you. Nation-building bastard children coveted these artifacts, breaking them down into thread, weaving a tapestry, taking the standard born by the lictors of powerful men as their principal symbol, naming themselves after it, picking out bits and pieces of Their Legacy to imagine some fundamental principle of State to build an empire around, to reinvigorate their People. Careerist sandbox-sifters take plastic shovels and dig in their playpens, tagging clay pots with numbers, devising enough theses to beget more theses, weaving together an entire Field from lies they've tricked themselves into believing, this broken piece of clay certainly fulfills that function, therefore this broken piece of marble must fulfil that function; academic algebra of guesses. Marble PFPs see perfect whiteness in the sun-whitened busts of African emperors, imagine moral purity in the visages of child-fucking senators, represent their emaciated selves with the ruins of some gore-soaked general.

The Roman Empire is nothing but a radioactive corpse, poisoning us from long beyond the grave. Rulers have unearthed its earthy remains to reinforce their rule from the second The City was sacked. Aristocrats crushed up its bones to mix into their wine, claiming it extended their lifespans, their virility. The corpse was their god as much as God, providing a right-to-rule as legitimate as the approval of the chief priest squatting in a putrefying heart. The bourgeois were more inventive, melting marrow into the concrete they poured at the foundations of their nations. Heirs to The Republic, heirs to wizened senators, orators, poets. Colonists learned Latin in academies in London, Virginia, the poetic speeches of slavers taught to the founding fathers of slaver republics. Their rule was to be governed by reason, tempered by debate with wit inherited from Seneca, in gaudy halls fashioned after forums and imperial temples carved by slaves. Rome reborn, Rome resurrected, Neoclassical Neoromans. Their dedication to the fantasy is impressive, true to imagined Rome to-the-letter. On the second field of Mars they threw spear after spear, shot bullet after bullet, committing the most grevious genocide ever witnessed to date, pushing West as Trajan pushed east, consecrating their right to rule with the superiority of their arms, their civilized mode of life; country farmers, a million Cincinati on a million poorly managed farms. They beg us to take them seriously still, caught as ever in illusion to the day, handing down laws from high chairs, men with lifetime tenure in slave-built legislative palaces. Illusion of empire begetting illusive empire, no nation on earth is a truer heir to The Corpse than the United States.

The Roman Empire is the Michelangelo finale of map painting games, loosened from the masonry of History, enshrined on a pedestal, in a screenshot folder, on a reddit post: Look at my Rome :), Rome formed by 1560, Rebuilt Rome in a day! Rome is an achievement, a formless thing to be formed by any empire the player puppets through history. To frame the Empire as an objective is to abstract it away from history, away from its subjects, away from its mines and roads, away from its really existing self, cutting clean the long strand of continuity that bound the whole rotting carcass together until its several dying breaths. Fashcore faggots masturbating to screenshots of Rebuilt Rome may as well be Odacer for how truly they pulverize the Empire, melting it to bloody lead and casting it forward as some alt-history beacon of The West, bvlwark of Evrope, dagger to the heart of Islam. The Real Rome died Islamic, Mehmed II was a truer augustus than any inbred Italian, Damascene scholars more dedicated heirs to Latin learning than any eyeless Greek, Córdoban Caliphs greater breakers of barbarian backs than any general since Germanicus. The Empire is an effigy of blind racist spite in spite of any trait that made Rome Roman beyond an imagined status as the high-water mark of Western greatness. The legacy of the Empire in the minds of gamers, the ceaseless desire to recast Rome in the 19th century, relies on the death-by-abstraction of their beloved fetish object, your Reformed Roman Empire By 1920 :) is neither Roman nor an Empire.

The Roman Empire lasted from 800bc to 1923ad. It dissipated as it went, fizzling into the Mediterranean like a blood bath bomb turning the sea wine-dark. It slaughtered as it went, it accumulated, piling bodies to bury under smooth stone roads stretching from Londinium to Damascus. It was a genocide machine, a desert with an emperor; sands bearing down on the heads of a hundred peoples subjugated to the mines. It built statues in this sand; a thousand, a million. We know them by their marble, carved in great gory chunks- blood running through veins- off the side of some Apennine mountain, melted down into the visage of one single bastard, shipped off to the furthest imperial outpost; to remind Egyptians, Britons, Anatolians, Cyrenicans exactly who owned their life. The Empire existed to disperse marble, they called the five good emperors the five Good Emperors because they got their statues the furthest, made them the safest. They built the sturdiest walls around their marble, kept the heretic hands of iconoclasts from tarnishing the perfect fruit of their finely tuned engines. If fascists understand one thing about the Empire, perhaps more than anyone else, it's the importance of the busts they present themselves as; the final finest product of a millennia of gore-soaked child-killing slave-driving accumulation.

The Roman Empire exists only in six questions you could ask to six men who care and the six dozen answers you'd receive in return.

"When did the Empire end?"
The 400's, the 600's, the 1400's, the 1900's.

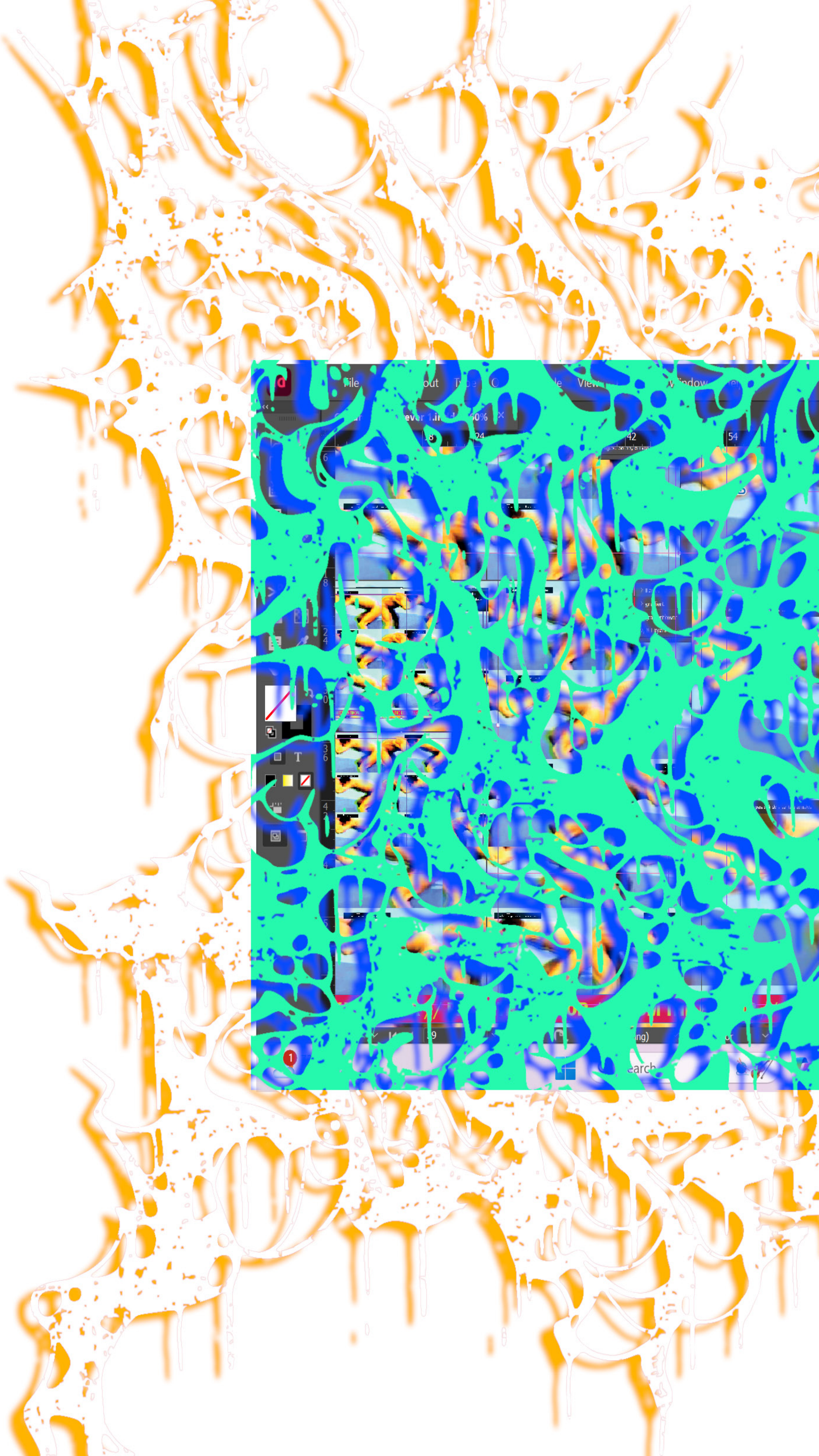
"Who was the last Emperor?
Diocletian, Romulus Augustulus, some Byzantine fuck. Mehmed VI.

"Why did the empire collapse?"
Degeneracy, lead, Christianity, the wrong kind of Christianity. Germans.

"Who is the true heir to the Empire?"
Napoleon, an inbred Austrian, a Bourbon bastard, the emir-in-exile, the same Byzantine fuck. A bunch of rotting corpses.

"What's the lasting legacy of the Empire?"
Civilization, Art, Romance. Slavery and statues.
"Is America the next Rome?"
Yes, no. Yes.

We rip open a vast and awful void every time we turn over the legacy of the Corpse, sitting in halls decorated in its style, bearing names descending from its finest men, allowing it to light up the pathways of our brains. It is a ghost conjured by mediums staring hard at warped reflection on a bald headed bust, banging on table bottoms, dropping their voices an octave to invoke Octavian. They scry bones just as well as any Sybiline priest, interpreting the Legacy of a world they never knew, quoting slavers and sucking off statues. It's hollow, facile, mastubatory to the core. What use is there for specters? Scatter the bones, crumble the statues, smash clay pots, melt lead, turn the colosseum inside out, deplatform the accumulative godhead, vaporize the statue fuckers, let The Roman Empire decay to dust in the memory of men. They can't fool me, they shouldn't fool you either.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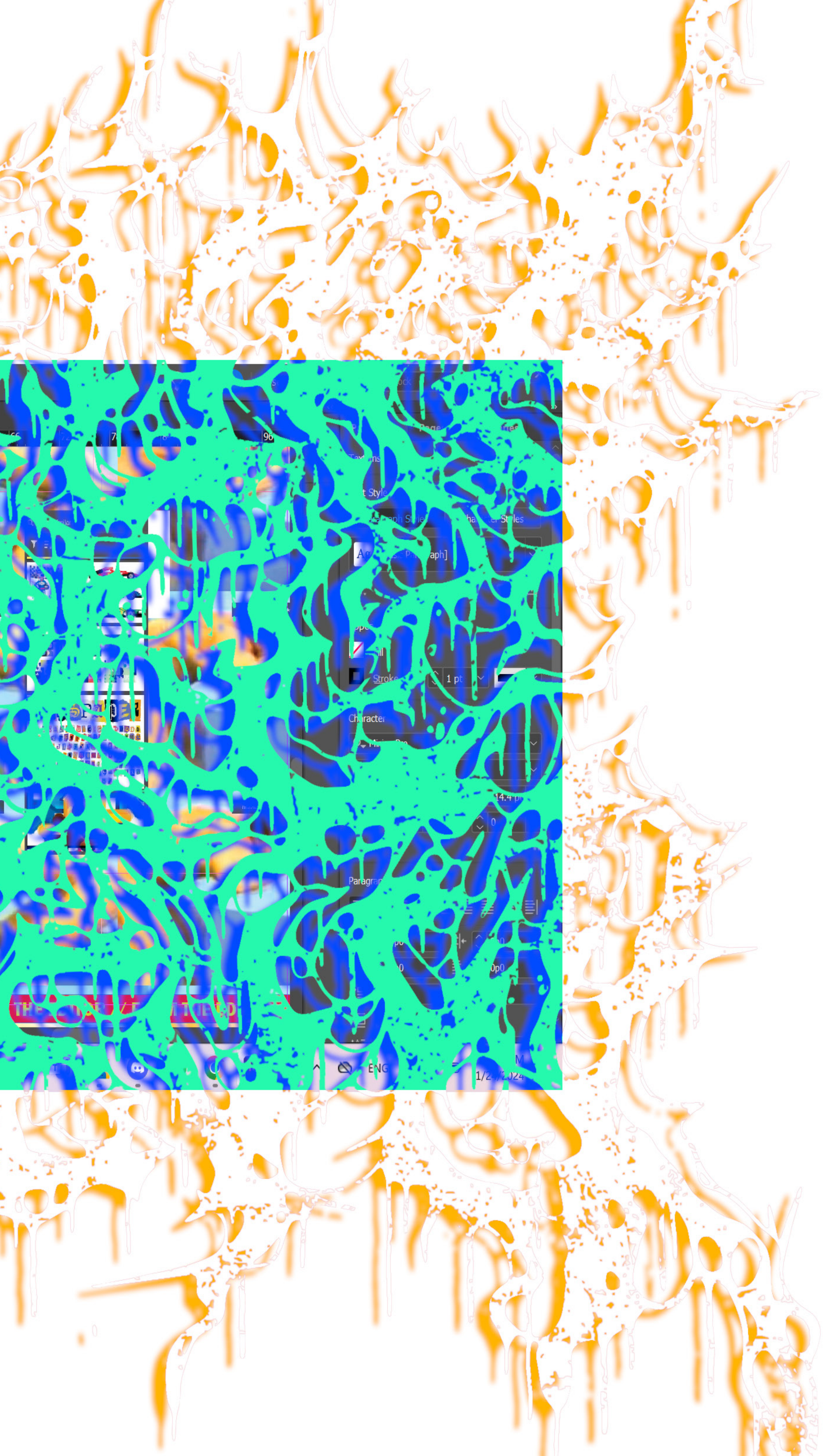
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ANYONE ELSE NOTICED THIS?

by Orson Welles

I really don't quite know how to formulate words to convey what I'm talking about in a way that doesn't make me sound like the most boring, shit-headed navelgazer, but, it's one of those things that, like, it's that nagging tiny bit of confusion that just won't go away, you're like waiting for that moment where you open the fridge door and suddenly just go "OH, I GET IT", but it hasn't arrived yet and it's looking less and less likely that it's ever going to happen, so, might as well send out my thoughts in the vain hope that someone can explain this to me. Still pisses me off just how much of a stupid thing to get this borderline obsessed over this is, but, man, I'm desperate.

So, like, basically everyone is familiar with the varying stages of, like, product placement in various places, and publicity stunts that every corp does from the tiniest startup to the huge giants who get sway in global politics. Like Mr. Peanut dying of septicaemia and then age regressing into a nutlet and then getting over it. The Mountain Dew-centric The Walking Dead episode. That one male BPD movie that was an elaborate commercial for Kraftwerk. The UK bread brand Hovis pivoting into beer and doing the annoying yeast connection and then getting it incorporated into the third season of Succession for all the alcoholism scenes. TF2 crossover items. It shows up in the weirdest ways, and sometimes it's "Char Aznable car" funny, sometimes it's sneaker war crimes. Gut punches and tummy ticklers.

Anyway, uh, I was with a few friends, playing the new Don't Starve Together special event. It's like a, I dunno some sort of "oh people are playing this game again, time to do a welcome back event to keep 'em coming" kind of thing, whatever, it's kind of neat, no weird season pass things just some cool largely aesthetic-only events that you can see if you frot a bush too weird. So like, I'm foraging, kind of just waiting around for everyone else to finish up with their really important thing they're doing, since I'd already finished up my chores like a handsome cherub of a boy boy, and I notice I pick up an item I haven't seen before. Some sort of junk, kind of thing you can probably refine into some basic resource, but I look at it, right? It's a can of Coca Cola. Like, unambiguously. Except, like, it doesn't say Coca Cola on it? Or even like, Coke? It just says "COLA'S" on it. That's weird, like, I heard they got this kind of brand deal, but why would they then just completely fake it for the joke, like McDoneits? And like. It's not uncommon to put references to things in item descriptions, it's cute sometimes. I read over this Coke can's description over and over again and I just can't fucking parse it. It just says, "WITH OR WITHOUT, CAN YOU TAKE IT?" It's some completely bullshit, absurd, over-the-top creepypasta "hyperrealistic blood from the eyes" type wording. Never seen it before.

So I like, look it up, boolean my DuckDuckGo searches, safe search off just in case, and it, like, takes me to just the regular old Coke website. On the front page, where they've got their current events and whatnot usually, it's just this huge diatribe about this new, "healing, feedback-responsive" re-branding effort they're doing? Which, first of all, makes no fucking sense. Like, the Pepsi UNIVERSE thing, where that one guy just went cummy about that peculiar and homely sphere, was unfathomable, but there was something comprehensible about it. And the time that the 7-Up Insurgency Split-off company made weird new flavors in celebration of their new creative freedoms like "CHERRY HELL" and "BLUE PINEAPPLE" and "CANDLEJACK SAUCE" and "TOP SHOT NASTY", a little unsettling, sure, but there have been weirder things. Like binky-inspired Victims of Communism merch you can buy to support your favorite loser and go sucksuck. "COLA'S" is just someone pretending to be excited the product, and they made it the new name of their whole company.

Whatever, I think, you know, I really don't care about what they do with their canned beverages and their skins, I won't be hocking any more or less loogies into strangers' cans while they're distracted by my long and awesome length, it really doesn't affect me. But nobody else is talking about this. It's, like, right on the website. I asked my friends, who I was gaming with in our TeamSpeak 3 polycule server (I'm not a part of any of that but like I'm cool so I get the member's pass) and they said they hadn't seen the item, so when they get back from chewing the cud I give it to them, and they pass it around like a biscuit, and they go "huh, weird". Completely reasonable reaction, the one I wish I could have had. I tell them this is apparently just the new great venture for Coke. They call me a retard, and it harms me a lot more than I made obvious because like, whatever, who cares? And I like, log onto my computer, and I send them screenshots of the Coke website. They call me a dumbass, it's fake, which humor man X account did I get this one from, when did I make this, dude we were gone for like five minutes what's your issue, you're pushing this way too hard. So I give them the link. They see it and then they go "okay". EUREKA! THANK GOD THEY UNDERSTOOD ME! WHAT WOULD I FOR MORE HAPPY!! But they kind of just leave it at that, they don't have much of an opinion about shit. That's why I'm not in the polycule, you know? Because I care.

Cut to the next day, we're not gaming anymore, I turned off your computer, I'm waking up from my new nightmare where no matter what I do I just can't stop that rat fuck Marley & Me from dying. I'm on my plane to my job at the biggest train on the country, I'm the one they let drive the train because I'm frequently the one so savant enough to track which button I have to push or lever I have to tug like a senior's pud to make the fuel squirt, the wheels whirl, the tracks widen, my fingers happen, the house on the other end of the house, and the pessengers hear my voice so I can tell them about the foods available at every station we'll be stopping at. Obviously I start my day at a train station, one of the ones at the very end, where the train is sheathed. First shift isn't until 20 minutes from now, so I'm just waddling around like a detective, get to see the guys who get paid to salivate on the walls so all the posters stick. Say hey, how're you doing, quite the weather to have, right? Yeah yeah, they say, kind of brushing me off like I'm a wasp but I slick back my wet hair and take it so cool. See the posters they're currently lubing up with tongue and buds.

It's a Coca Cola poster. An "old" one. Just completely normal. It's got "HAVE A COKE WITH THRUPPENCE" on it, like the good old days. I can hardly contain my anger. So I grab this guy by theHey guys does anyone have any recollection of this one TV show were it was, like, it wasn't Too Many Cooks, it was about these two guys where one of them was really, really huge, and the other one was about as tiny as a regular old thumbtack. I don't remember a damn thing about any of it, I'm pretty sure they just fucked around with recipes? Like one of them made a huge loaf of cake and the other one made a tiny little slab of cake instead, because he's approximately the size of a man if he were scaled exactly proportionately down to about two inches with like a ray gun or something. Heh. So like these chefs were, I think one of them could fly? I'm pretty sure it was the big guy who could fly and the small one could hop into one of his folds and travel around the world, helping people solve their cooking conundrums wherever they may end up. I don't think any of the lore of the show was all that well established in the show, they had too much action to get out of the way, it really sometimes did feel like they just, HAPPENED to show up at the place where someone gummed up their grandma's special recipe cup of spum. It really wouldn't surprise me if these charlatans were responsible for cursing all of these cooking appliances so they could engage in heroic deeds to spread their fame and famous, they really did seem like opportunists. Pinstripe personified. A real barberslop quartet.

At last, it's whatever, I'm completely spent, it's like, every single day for months and months goes like this, nobody's believing me, acting like I'm some kind of guy who cried hello, telling me like my information is at war because I'm conspiring about something stupid, it's just another day in the life of a monosexual. I'm getting the plane home and I have my check in hand, with all of those sweet, sweet dollars in my hands, the sweat from my palms is making the ink run but that's how I like it, give those thankless fuckheads at the bank something to challenge themselves with during their workday, I see them, always on my phone, looking at TEXTS, useing YOUBE. Yutube I mean. God, what would you do without me. You're kind of weird for ordering oinge juice with ice though, by the way. And your hair is dripping into my food. So, anyway, as I was saying, cokes just tugging my rump all the time with this shit. I don't wanna start going ME ME ME about everything but I'm fucking APPARENTLY the only guy in the world who knows anything about this, even though it's RIGHT FUCKING THEIR, and the COLA COMPANY, who is basicly like your teacher if you've lived in America, is just changing itself so weirdly and not even the lowest common denominator social meteor jokester is willing to go "uh, THIS just happened" about it. I can't fucking stand it, man! You can't just, do this to a guy. I'm fucking sick to my stomash. God. Oh, yeah, hey, waiter, any idea how long my mancakes will arrive? "Did I say pancakes", is that what you said? Yeah, that's what I said. Boing. Right, where was I, what are we here for... ah yeah, so like, I heard this Formula

1 thing is going well. Is that like a new thing? It seems really cool, nothing way cooler than a bunch of latex clad dudes sucking as fast as they can in big lead chambers of invisible fire. You think I could get into that? Like, I got my license when I was younger, zero points on it, I think there's no way that they can just refuse a guy fWait hold on what was that I said earli

stay tuned for

PUNISHMENT IN FLESH

by Julia Norza

I

Life returned in a desperate blaze, from her first infantile wail to the moment she'd shot herself in the head. It was more memory than could fit in the brain of a dog, mangy, panting, and starving on the hot pavement. Her bones sagged into an earth that offered no support. A rumble warned she'd die soon without nourishment.

She thought, fleetingly, starving might be grand. After all, she had not wanted to be alive. But she was discovering that starving to death was too painful an end. She rose on bones too dense for the muscles actuating them: so she was a killing dog. A pitbull maybe, or a rottweiler, anyhow famished to submission. The concrete lit her nose afire. Hours ago, a rat had shat to the west. Behind her, a man relieved himself in an empty lot. She wheezed, involuntarily, a plunge of air washing her throat. Trash rotten in the summer heat, marijuana from a teenager's window, mold from an air conditioner, meat.

She followed the meat. It was a bird, freshly slain and caged off by three dogs. Once, during a morning jog, she'd been beset by half a dozen strays, spearing out of the shadows in a vacant lot that would go forever unsold. They might've been protecting their territory, or aflame with rabies, or hungry, like her.

Feather and flesh tantalized her, and disgusted her, and she couldn't bear not to beg for a bite. The petition emerged from her as a bark that sent a shockwave rippling up dogfur. She faced three sets of teeth like fences. Her ears rang when one of the dogs, a hairless monster, least rangy of the lot, responded in kind. The pack's canines gnashed, slick saliva clicking as it swished in their mouths, steaming in the heat.

Her ears flattened against her skull. Her tail tucked between her legs. The sun was in her eyes. Just past midday. She tried to shut that away too. Now there was only the stench of the city and the assurance, pulling at the pit of her stomach, that she had to run. She sprang into the streets, where cars assaulted each other. Leaping out of the way put her in the path of a car, swerving gracelessly and grinding its passenger doors on the lane over.

The cars parted impolitely, with a squeal of tires, the rightmost managing a halt atop the sidewalk only a couple of meters away from a lamppost. Out stepped the owners. Their conversation began at yelling and threatened to escalate into punches. Demons of metal and flame sped by.

Adrenaline overtook hunger, for now. She was in one of the major veins of the city, thrombotic with the clots of a traffic jam. Everywhere she had once cared about was an hour's trot away. Many times, she had told herself the reason she didn't brave the outdoors was because of the desert summer. Just that, not her fear of others. A puddled beckoned her two buildings over to the water packing plant, where private companies sold the purified water the city failed to provide as public service. A young man had dropped a fifteen-liter jug, leaving behind a stain that would soon evaporate. No matter how great her thirst, she could do nothing but lap up pathetic spoonfuls, one at a time. The water had rapidly maligned with the odor of thousands of animals that had walked past, sat on, pissed, defecated, vomited, died here.

She wanted to remember death. It was one of her worst habits. If she found no pain, she would create it. Years after she'd stopped cutting herself, she'd begun scratching at the scars on her forearm without thinking. Then she cut again, right atop the healed scars. It was tougher, more rewarding. She killed herself two weeks after relapse, in the apartment she now headed towards.

A police car blockaded the entrance, emergency lights on. Her body might have been removed already. The room remained closed for the sake of assessing the veracity of her suicide. That should prove conclusive in short order. All of her possessions were fastidiously in place. She'd left a death poem, incoherent to anyone but herself. She hadn't had any enemies because she hadn't had any goals. But at the time of suicide, she had been the most important person in the world. If everyone on the planet had appeared then at her doorstep bearing flowers, she would have vomited on them.

Two officers strolled down the stairs to her apartment. They stood on her sepulcher and shared jokes. She wanted to bite their ankles off and let them know how terrible it all was. They had guns, and she was weak and tired. All she could do was bark and run.

She was malnourished to the edge. The sun was merciless. Her paws' epidermis had peeled almost as soon as she'd begun her journey. Beneath boiled a mess of blood and blisters. She hadn't made it far enough to drown out the policemen's voices not because they were louder than the city but because she'd memorized every fold of their sneers. She failed to pick up the footsteps of an approaching set of teenagers. It was her nose that warned her, of their varying states of filth, the cloud of spray-on deodorant, and, clamoring for her, a piece of meat.

The oldest among them was solidly college-aged, and his secretions had ripened into those of an unwashed adult. His shirt was drenched in layers of drink and slop. The human part of her mind that warned her against trusting turned smaller and smaller, shrinking to accommodate her hunger. She leapt for the meat before spotting the knee. The irritating, throbbing pain of a strike to the nose assaulted her with exponential intensity. Her new snout was too sensitive. She covered her face with her paws in ridiculous human instinct, leaving her sides exposed. The more belly she showed, the harder they kicked. At last, she gave up and rolled on her side.

The teenagers left her bleeding on the sidewalk, another bag of flesh for the city to ignore. The abandoned scrap of meat they'd used to taunt her moldered on the pavement. But it was meat. Caked in grime and the powdered glass of what could've been a phone screen or a glass pipe, it was still meat. She swallowed the day's humiliation.

II

It was dark when she woke, just before the summer lashed the city anew. The blurry patina of her new eyes made of twilight an oppressive dark. She jumped from pool to pool of streetlight. Her ribs stung. She would need food and water soon. The anemic slab of beef from the teenagers had only paliated death; she was still so far from thriving. As a child, she daydreamt of heroism. Age sanded down her goals. Now she wished for a PhD, now for the energy to pull through the last of her studies, now for the will to restart life. When her dreams ran out, death filled the blank.

She wandered back to the lot she'd escaped the day before. At least, she believed so. The dustbowls were indistinguishable, valleys of torture carved into the town's flatland. Her mediocre new eyesight would never be capable of telling them apart again.

She made her way towards the tents, hidden from the police's view by mounds of refuse. One of its inhabitants might pity her with a bite to eat. There were three tents, spaced a respectful distance apart. The first tent's owner was asleep within. The second spotted her before she could spot him. His eyes, bloated as bladders, were fixated on the tent flaps. He gripped a handful of dirt with one hand, jumped at her approach, and she knew to leave.

The third tent was empty, so she resolved to return to the first and wait for its owner to wake. Nothing but sitting and waiting, as good dogs do. Servility came easier to her than she liked to admit. Her life had been one of sycophancy to people who had done naught to earn the authority they lorded. It had been childish to imagine death would be different. Death was another spoke in the wheel of punishment. If she died she'd return as a tree next, to obey the whims of worm and soil. So she'd best get used to it now. She patted her tail on the floor, and managed to sit in one place doing nothing at all for an hour.

But the sun rose, and the man did not. Early daylight aimed straight at the tent, and there were no stirrings or disgruntled murmurs. She nudged her head into the crevice and gazed within. The man's respiration was so shallow it escaped even her keen hearing. She had seen others in the throes of overdose. Herself, once. If someone took him to a hospital, he would yet live. She sped out of the lot, towards the sidewalk and up to the commuters, and yelled: "Help! A man is overdosing! Help me take him to the hospital!"

All this elicited was fear and disgust from early joggers and mothers carrying groceries. One child was so startled that she threw up on the sidewalk before running away, crying. Why wasn't anyone listening? She screamed with hellbent stamina, until the sun was well into its sojourn and her vocal cords strained like elastic pulled too far. Still no one stopped to pay another glance at the dog and the dying man she guarded. Furious, grievous, she returned to the tent.

The man lay prone on a dirty sleeping bag, saliva pooling corrosive under his lips. He had no possess-

-ions other than life, and that, too, ebbed. She put her snout beneath his to check for breath, and was met with silence. Barking into his ear was of no avail. Maybe, she tried to comfort herself, he had been dead in the first place. She had only been tricked by the recency of his death. He had not yet begun the process of decomposition.

He was fresh.

She stared at the carcass, rooted in place as her humanity railed against the discovery. She would not. She could not. The tent smelled revolting, But the meat was unspoiled. The meat begged to be consumed, if not by her then by the germs whose individual scents she could now pick out as if under a microscope. She wondered if the man's soul had, like hers, wandered into an animal's body, if he was now awakening to ignorant hunger somewhere in the city. Or maybe further away. Or maybe right here, bacillus on his own beard, a lifeform too small to generate the realization that he feasted on himself. Disgusted, she licked at the man's chin in an attempt to scare away the bacteria. They continued to proliferate, too small to be bothered by movements of such godly proportions. His beard was fuzzy against her tongue and snout. After that, tectonic layers of caked grime, dried sweat, fermented mud, saliva hers and his, and then, a barbeque in the shade of a balmy afternoon.

She stumbled away, coughing out the remainder of the bite. The brittle bones of the man's jaw lay half exposed, amongst a splotchy sea of sinew. The neck looked tough and chewy, unlike the cheek, which had been soft to the point of melting. She tried to vomit, but her body lacked the instinct to be revulsed. Her body knew the truth she and everyone else refused to acknowledge: life had always been this simple. Digested and digester, doer and done-to. She dug her snout into the ground and covered her eyes with trembling paws.

The body remained. Her stomach had the spectacular audacity to grumble. The sound carried the announcement that she was now a cannibal. It was an iron-branded identity that could never be eliminated, like survivor and murderer. Her wish of immortal memory would be granted: this was a name of violence, where history takes root. She would be a cannibal unto death, beyond death if metempsychosis coiled pushed her deeper into unsophistication until she was a loose neuron, screaming the signal for hunger. Droplets of static blood collected on the man's beard. Blood, she had tasted before. The menses of some girl whose face she had forgotten. Her own, licking at wounds. She would get her nourishment from this inoffensive liquid. She trotted over at the corpse and opened her maw.

Blood slicked down the engines of her body, activating twin instincts that struggled against one another with such force she knew she must explode. One was the guttural pull of her stomach, holding her jaws open from the inside. The other was the frantic forebear of guilt, because once she began, she would not stop. She grabbed on to guilt with all she had, which was too little. She wished she could retreat into madness, to dissociate and rocket off into delusion. But her illness had always been an overactive obsession with detail: the coppery torrent of red cells, and the serrated filaments of facial hair carpeting the man's jowls, prematurely gray, and the nose, which would've proven inedibly cartilaginous with omnivore teeth, and the futility of digging her paws into the ground in an attempt at stopping herself from taking his eye next, and how little an eye resembled a fruit when bitten into, how it was almost all water save for the optic nerve at the back.

She was eating so fast it was making her overheat. Half-chewed segments of lip came rolling out of her mouth and onto the floor. She panted and feasted and panted and feasted and when she was done, the man's face had disappeared. In a fit of masochism, she pedaled back to behold the cadaver. It was devoid of recognizable features. If anyone would bother with identification, they'd have to do it through teeth. Nobody would. No one who died like this had a plaque beside their name in government archives. The body would remain here, skull picked by carrion fungi. This empty tent would be his headstone. It would have no name. He had lost it the day he had become an unacceptable human. She had contributed to this alienation, too. She had deprived his remnants of the right to be his. Defaced, they were anyone's.

Biology had defeated her so thoroughly that she could not even weep. But she could sit vigil for him. With his flesh grumbling in her intestines, she would sit vigil. She had known him more intimately in this flash than any itinerant who pretended to care enough to refuse him loose change, on the grounds he might use it on drugs. She traced careful circles around him, memorizing him through nose and ears. His hairs smelled of months of accumulated grease. He had worn the same shoes for too long. She tucked her paws beneath her stomach. She forced her ears upright, statuesque to ward off intruders.

Someone approached. Their footfalls jerked, barely bothering with the ground before stumbling onto the next. At one point, they stopped, veering before sprinting towards her tent. Her hairs bristled back, pulling her posture along until she was sitting on her haunches, teeth bared. Ammonia and wax invaded her nostrils. The man from the other tent pulled open the flap with a grip too strong for the frisson of his fingers. Metal glinted in his hand. She cursed him away. His expression whipped from some point in the distance onto her. Whether his face carried fury or fear, she could not tell, but it was propelling the knife towards her. Her cheek stung where the blade erred. She remembered the day before, when whimpering and trembling had been useless. Her fangs caught the man's arm on its retreat. It took his overstimulated nerves a heartbeat to register pain, and then he yelled, trying to shake her off as his knife clattered to the ground. She clung to him as she had never clung to life. Only when he threatened a kick did she let the arm, raw and bloody, go free. The man dropped to the floor, scuttling for his knife. His neck was exposed. Her mind whirled. She bolted through the tent flap and into the midday sun.

III

Shade shifted hourly under cloudless skies. Restaurant owners chased her away to make space for their clients. Customers tossed scraps her way. Zealous mothers clutched their children close when they tried to pet her. One boy slathered in an excess of coconut sunblock stroked her ears. Before her suicide, she had not received a hug in six months. It made her feel piteous and slimy. She left before the boy stopped.

Behind a fast food trash can. Beneath rachitic palm leaves. Beside shipping containers. All these places she abandoned to the sun's rotation, until she came to the place where she'd awoken. It smelled different, so many beasts and men having come and gone in the time since, and it smelled the same, an impregnation of citylife sludge that would never wash away. Nothing new is ever built. Archeologists cracked away the earth to find ancient sufferings, as if they were not here, in the pungence of the now. If she kept walking, she would reach the derelict park where she'd smelled the fresh-dead bird on the first dawn of her new life.

The scent of the other dogs reached her before the park came into view. They had urinated on the concrete, rubbed their hides against the rickety bleachers and the single backboard. A broad obelisk sprouting from a carpet of overgrown grass had once been imposing, before years of sunbleach and ill maintenance stripped its paint. Upon its surface was scratched an illegible memorial. Its heft offered a shield against the sun most of the day, and when it didn't, there were the bleachers.

She needed to be here, safe. That meant currying trust from the xoloitzcuintli who had threatened her two days ago. She could offer what, food? She would have to learn to hunt first, and those who could teach her were these same dogs. Or she could steal. Theft was not a temptation she'd managed to avoid, it was instead a crime she had been afraid of committing. Despite the insistence of acquaintances who regularly shoplifted everything from candy bars to cartfuls of alcohol, she was terrified of being caught. She'd navigated her addiction hidden from the best meaning members of her family. Even the ones she knew would offer her helping hands. Too shameful to ask for help, and too prideful to accept it.

Now she was a dog. The consequences of being caught would be immediate, then they would be over. She followed her nose towards a poulterer's. Sweating customers sought refuge under the storefront tarp. The blasting heat of the kitchen was better than the sun. Aside the grills lined up uncooked chickens, dripping with defrost. She sat next to the kitchen's door.

She was upright the second the lock unlatched, bolting through the door, scrambling atop the counter. The raw chicken was almost too delicious to resist, but she gripped it with her teeth without biting through. The cooks' panic lasted much less than she'd anticipated. One man holding a metal dustpan, whose legs she had ran through on the way in, blocked her escape. He struck a at her loin, narrowly missing her damaged side. A jolt of pain sent her jumping and almost whim-

-pering. Almost. She could not afford to lose the chicken. Staff and customers erupted into bedlam. She threw her bodyweight against her attacker, sending them both tumbling through the unsecured door and into the brick wall outside.

There were three snaps, not consecutive and not in unison, a train off its rails. First went the dustpan's wooden handle. The next was the most intimate, a sound that spread like lightning on water through her extremities: her rib had broken. The chicken went flying out of her mouth. The final snap was much like the one in her abdomen, but foreign, a sickly, organic breakage that coincided with the abrupt interruption of the man's fall. There came a collective gasp from the poulterer's assemblage. Bursting with adrenaline, she did not feel pain. She seized the opportunity to reclaim the chicken and turned once, in preparation for dodging a broom or a mop.

The man hadn't moved. Bright carmine on the wall traced down to where his head rested on the ground. The corona of blood grew steadily underneath his occipital, fed by a rivulet gushing from a fissure large enough to fit a finger in. His eyes were closed, but not peaceful. Somebody shrieked. The man convulsed, and she ran.

She hadn't meant to even to injure him. She had only pushed him out of the way to secure her own safety. He had been the one brutalizing her. She only wanted food and shelter, and she could not have killed someone in her search to fulfill such basic needs. It would be so unfair. She was running through traffic, cars swerving around her and honking and she not responding, letting everyone else move out of her way for once. If they could not see that she was starving, boiling and in despair, that was their fault.

Without realizing it, she'd slowed. The adrenaline had simmered down, exposing the agony of her split rib. Breathing was difficult. Walking with her injured side, excruciating. The park was half a block away now. Her inflamed nerves gave her something to focus on other than her deeds. Every time she willed away the guilt, it became smaller and smaller, an appendix, a vestige of a psyche that no longer belonged to her. But like an appendix, it remained. Any time, it would metastasize.

The park swiveled into view. At its aris, paws tucked beneath their bellies, lay the three dogs. The xolo deigned to lift its head from its shady lounge and regard her. She'd expected them to hold a grudge. But they had battled as many tribulations as she had since their meeting. She who had been an enemy one day, could be an ally the next. The meal she carried was proof enough of her intentions.

Just in case, she kept her eyes deferent, even as a prickle in the back of her neck warned her she'd captured the attention of the other two. A safe, harmless distance from the pack, she dropped the chicken she'd sacrificed a rib for, and stepped away.

Their investigative snuffling became a moist, messy crunching. She raised her eyes to find the pack engrossed in ripping the carcass apart. She closed the gap until her snout was inches away from a bite. There was no reaction to her presence, no welcome but no wrath either. She tested the limits of this acceptance with a tug and a nibble on the tender meat of a thighbone, afraid to swallow in case she had to stage an escape. But she was allowed.

She struggled to keep up her new comrades' pace. Swallowing made the pain in her ribcage flare, and there was no deliberacy for devouring dogs, only great chunks and dribbling chins. In the end, she got the smallest share.

The meal done, the large xoloitzcuintli shoved the other two out of its way. She fixated on the ground again. The dog sniffed her over, memorizing her scent. This close up, it smelled overwhelming, hormone glands atop its nose alight. Its reek fell on her as it rubbed itself over her face, marking her as a member of the pack. It was not pleasant. It smelled humid, rotten in life. But it smelled certain, too, certain she'd have a place to sleep. Her tail wagged as she was guided towards the monument under whose shadow she would while away the afternoon.

IV

It was a pleasure to be awakened under the shade, instead of having sleep wrenched from her eyelids. They greeted the morning all together with a stretch of their hind legs. Without the pressure of urgent circumstance, she would've been content to waste the day lay-

-ing here. The pack's leader had other plans.

The city was a bipolar hive of activity and laze. Down its veins sped commuters already late to work. On the side roads, children on summer break and day-drinkers remained fast asleep. Industrial dust coated the asphalt in lieu of dew. It would continue thickening day after still day, layers of ersatz pollen for the late autumn to sweep away. Grocers sponsored by nationally branded, internationally owned breweries sold hair of the dog. That acrid smell which she hadn't noticed until her death was the geothermal plant powering the city with wastewater.

The xolo's ears radared in search of breakfast. The others flanked its sides. She fell back to the rear. Cocking her ears as she loped along, she took in the world. A brilliant, overpressured middle schooler had faltered in his midsummer English studies. His impoverished father, who had purchased his education in the hopes he wouldn't end up a maquiladora worker too, beat him. A nurse whose exhaustion could be heard through her smile packed lunch for her two children, then coughed wetly. Three state administrators debated the finer points of obfuscating the magnitude of resources divested from local cotton farmers. A bird-

a bird!

She stopped and tilted her head. Several birds, in a misarranged circle, pecking the floor for breadcrumbs. She barked for the pack to stop. They turned at her, and she was afraid. What if her hearing was wrong? She'd only had it for three nights and four mornings. But the brusque language of barks couldn't beg false alarm.

Through the maze of industry, she took the lead. Everywhere was a fallen lamppost, an effort to repair electricity lines. Yards uncrossable despite their emptiness, guarded by chainlink. Minute alleyways her paltry canine eyesight would miss on their first cycle around a block. The birds stayed put, picking at the pavement with a brittle pit-pat-pit

Their prey awaited on the other side of a fence, taller than her highest jump, tarped over with thick green cloth, and, if the signs were to be believed, electrified.

One of the others trotted down the block and beckoned the rest over. She was last to arrive at a hole in the fence, hidden by brick and gravel. She beheld the discovering dog with an embarrassing admiration. It was a tall, spindly thing, an escapee from a gated community similar to the one they now infiltrated. The ghost of a collar wrapped around its neck in an uneven circle of fur. Their gazes met with mutual curiosity. It broke away and scurried through the fence first, followed by another member of the pack: a jittery mutt who couldn't seem to keep his eyes on any one thing for long. She went last.

She felt the trees befores she could see them, on her fur and beneath her paws. Shade from meticulously spaced palms minimized the sun. Here was grass, and pavement that did not hurt. Morning athletes ran and stretched across the community flats. There was a panorama of other dogs, too, slavering their love all over their owners, or chained to their posts with bliss. And just beyond the park, in front of a wooden bench, gobbling down the last of their crumbs, the birds.

She hung back with her pack, watching for a cue. As the seconds passed, she realized they were privileging her with the opening salvo. Looking from bird to bird, each so distinct in gait, in the accumulation of streetlife injuries, so organic and colorfully alive, she didn't know whether she would be capable of ending them. Not on purpose. She thought of the man from the previous day, existence seeping out from the puncture in his skull. She thought of the man in the tent whose skull she'd rendered faceless. All it took was that one moment, and then all achievements, all expectancies and miseries were gone. Everyone slave to the meat.

Any, all of these birds could be as her, too large a heart castigated with too small a life. She peered into the abyssal black of the fattest pigeon's pupil, scrying for evidence of thought. It was no use. Its head bounced, betraying nothing. She circled. Over and over, she tried to lock eyes with it, and the bird kept looking everywhere except her. She'd moved into its blind spot without even knowing it.

Her body sprang into action, uncoiling her hind legs into a lunge. She tried to stop, and stumbled, mouth closed inches from her target. Somewhere very far away, the throng of birds scattered in shock. She should get up and chase them. She was so very hungry, and so were her compatriots. But she lacked the energy to spurn herself with cruelty, and her drained body would not respond to gentle persuasion.

A revolt of barks snapped her out of delirium. Her pack deranged after the pigeons. There were ravenous growls, empty jaws gnashing violently shut, plaintive yelps of defeat. The residence's owners were awake in full swing. Most were agape, holding back teenagers with phone cameras. Some ran for the entrance checkpoint where the community's paid guardsmen awaited. They would have airguns, or stun batons. Even nightsticks were more than they could handle. She shouted at her companions to run, but they would not listen. She did not want to die. She turned on her tail and sped away.

In her rush, she overshot the exit, and discovered that the electric hazard warnings atop the fence were not for decoration. It jolted her with an angry buzz that left a tingle on her legs. The sound of fighting and the aroma of burnt hair kept her company as she hoped for the return of her pack. She could not tell whether the faraway snarling was human or canine. Then there were shouted directions, chasing after the trot of six pairs of legs. The pack shot out of the hole. She lagged behind until they fell exhausted.

The xoloitzcuintli held a dead bird in its mouth. She swirled her ears, beaming that her effort had paid off. It dropped the bird to the ground and claimed the first, largest chunk. The other two closed around the carcass and joined in. When she approached, expecting to receive her share, they did not open a path. The xoloitzcuintli ate like a fever. It dug into tough cartilage, pushed his paws against the ground and levered his jaw upwards, creating there an opening. She dove in, but it met her with a growl. The other two backed it up without baring their teeth, yet not stopping until she had stepped away.

Only once the pack had had their fill was she granted a turn. And they had been ravenous. A miserable eternity of picking at the carcass earned her maybe one mouthful of meat. From looking at the pigeon's dead eye, it was impossible to determine whether or not it was the one she'd chosen. If not for the patina of red seeping into its feathers, this amorphous splatter would have not even scanned as organic. She thought of the man in the tent, now the taste, now the memory of a taste, now nothing. She ate the eye.

Her spot at the pack's rear went undisturbed. Late into the night, as exhaustion carried her to sleep, she realized effort alone was worthless. She would not be punished little by little. She would do and eat, or she would fail and starve.

V

Breakfast was more scraps. The situation had become intolerable. She would land them a mammal, a fat, delicious one.

An hour into their hunt, she heard a trill. She halted and pivoted her ears towards the sound, which returned in staccato, accompanied by a chorus of hisses, then a strangle. A cat. She gave two excited barks and headed for the mewl.

The matching pair of ripping flesh and birdscent emanated from a graffitied alleyway. The cat was a tubby endeavor, a housecat on the run or granted permission to decimate the bird populace by its owner. Its coat was a two-tone of orange and grey. The ferocity with which it dug her fangs into prey betrayed nothing of the upbringing indicated by her collar.

It was a shame that she'd have to kill such a gorgeous creature. Before, she'd considered herself a lover of cats over dogs, though she hadn't had the means to maintain either. Cats were self-reliant and efficient, where a dog's strength implored for the hand of a master. Lonesome it was, but wanting, it was not. Every crunch of the bone in the cat's mouth seemed to scoff: which would you rather be?, as if she hadn't been both.

Alerted by her footfalls, the cat dropped the carcass and arched its back into a hiss. The stonework piled too high even for its feline agility. It was a true dead end.

Her scant lips tugged back. In a flash, she was on her prey. The size difference was great, but not so much to subdue in one bite. The cat clawed at her muzzle in a desperate frenzy, thin and sharp as a scalpel, more infuriating than injurious. One found its way into her eye, and she yowled. The cat rolled away, bleeding from its abdomen. Its mewls of distress were ear-splitting, weakening. She had underestimated it, but not by much.A badly broken leg stunted its escape as it stumbled, foolishly, in the direction of the pack, final cry dying in its birth as she leapt upon its back and dug into its haunches, splintering its spine and everything beneath it with a snap.

She ravaged a lump of cat flesh and, with a toss of the head and a gulp, signaled the banquet. Cat meat was stringier than she had expected, but plentiful and unbidden of need to gnaw the bone. Muscle corded the backbone. The belly's flesh was savory with fats that wet her chin with every bite. She ate quick and careless. Trophies of the hunt were best savored not in the palate, but in the heaviness of the stomach.

Once the cat had been picked clean of meat, a stench of resentment rose from her companions. She had taken a much larger piece than the rest of them. Was that not her right? They had made it quite clear that greater merit beget greater reward. The xoloitzcuintli shook off an excess of blood and slipped back into the leading role.

At the sound of squealing wheels, her pack seized all at once. Around the corner tumbled an unwieldy white block of reinforced steel with a pawprint painted on its side, scarring the pavement with burnt rubber. The van's doors swung open before it stopped. Out sprang two men, chunks of padding covering their forearms and abdomens. From a time before suicide, a memory glinted: a reportage, in word and photograph, of the city's sparse and inadequate dog pounds. Dogs squeezed together in cages, three or five per. Chronic underfunding and the smell of shit and bleach. Hopeless species rotting as adopters ignored them in favor of loveable little chihuahuas. Sources that wished to remain anonymous confirming that, yes, they culled the population on the 31st of every month. The men wielded a net large enough to hold any of them. The pack turned and ran.

Within seconds, the distance between the dogs and their aspiring captors was insurmountable. A little more and they'd be out of the inner city and into the boulevard, where traffic was too choked for the dogcatchers to pursue. But safety was still far when a sting in her side tugged her screaming to the ground. The broken rib which she'd powered through the past day begged for triage. The pack did not stop. They fled, vanishing to specks on the sunbaked horizon. Her howls of despair became howls of loathing. They sounded very much alike.

A noose closed around her throat. One dogcatcher jerked her up and off the ground, closing her airways. She hung from the catch pole, pawing at the string around her neck. She found, to her awful shock, that the part of her that had once begged for oblivion was inaccessible now that she needed it most. The sizzling summer midday faded into obscurity.

It did not surprise her when she opened her eyes again. She knew the universe had ordained her eternal return. What did surprise her was that she was still a dog. The same dog in the same city. The world was blurred by a thick haze too close to her face. She tried to push it away. It responded with a little give, at first, then tangled into impossibility. Her captors dragged her by the netting along the uneven ground, loose concrete jutting into her damaged side every few steps. They were in the business of belaboring a respectable death. Instead of dying at the length of her pride, she would be subjected to a parade of indignities. She struggled with all the might she had left, but her buckling only tightened the net.

The dogcatchers tossed her onto the van's floor. By luck she avoided impact to her broken side, but the galling clang of metal still rang throughout her nerves. The van's huge left door slam shut. Between the hand that closed it and its forearm shone a patch of exposed skin. She directed her teeth there, knowing it would not grant her freedom, still imagining the suppurating wound she'd leave. It was the first act of pure vengeance she'd ever taken, and it was immediately reciprocated with an elbow, connecting with her chin and sending her reeling back into the van. The doors slammed shut. It was black now, lightless and windowless and oven-hot.

Asphalt cracked every year under the expansion and contraction of desert summer and winter. The municipality never bothered covering potholes, and the van drove straight into each of them. Its rickety suspension fired jolts of pain up her side. Many like her had died here. Tumbling in the dark, she forgot the door's direction. It mattered little. The door would be wherever her enemies awaited.

The van came to its last stop. Noise from bustling cars and aggrieved pedestrians became the chorus of hundreds of dogs learning helplessness. She detested her cellmates before she even saw them. Approaching boots. She stretched back on her haunches, tilting to compensate for the bad side, and lunged at the sliver of light. They were as ready for her as she was for them: she narrowly avoided landing into an open net. She sought her captors' legs. Every time she thought she'd found a crack in armor, she was disappointed with more padding. She never even spotted the net. Her efforts redoubled when she realized she'd been trapped, to no avail.

As she was hauled off to her new home, she scanned the faces of a dozen hundred dogs. None of them conjured up any excitement for the newcomer, used to seeing man and dog alike come and go to little effect on their parsimonious routine of slop and sleep They all melted into the same pestilent cauldron, fleas and spit and the strangely neutral hormonal makeup of spay. But one of them stood atop the rest. It smelled like the street, muggy and smoky. It smelled like her. She did not have to search for its owner long. The least occupied cage opened for her. Inside awaited a tall, hairless animal, every bit as ragged as she was and still with heart enough to growl at his captors, in the timbre of wounded authority.

The door shut behind her. She was left alone with the xoloitzcuintli. It tried to hold its head high and alert, but its neck tilted under the weight of exhaustion. She scanned each of its limbs for a favored side. It could've well sustained as many injuries as her if it'd scuffled with the dogcatchers. It displayed no intention of fighting, but fights are not agreed to. She leapt for its neck. It tucked away, and she converted her lunge into a full-body ram, aiming at no bone in particular. She was rewarded with an agonal howl as the xoloitzcuintli slumped to the ground. Together, they rolled around the grimy flooring. She met its bites with swipes across the nose. Her paws came away dripping. Both of them missed the oxidized whine of the cage door's hinges. Electric pain coursed through her body, no discernible source, equidistant across her meridians. She remembered suicide.

VI

In her captors' place, she would have executed herself. She ought at least to have been relocated away from her enemy. But the shelter was beyond capacity, and had been since foundation. The xoloitzcuintli laid asleep against the bare floor. She could probably land one or two attacks before being stun-batoned again. So she stretched and took stock of their position. The room was a prison, devoid of amenities: a bucket for food, a bucket for water, and free reign to urinate on the floor, where they also slept.

A rusty shriek awoke her cellmate. Three humans had come to feed them. One carried a pungent bag with gloved hands. The other two acted as guards, armed with electric prods. She eyed them as they spilled sludge into her bucket. Their weapons were fearsome, but they were not. She regarded the xoloitzcuintli, who fixed the men with escapatory fury. They were still of one mind, one plan for the pack.

When the door opened for lunchtime, they bareled through. The man holding the bucket fell on spindly legs, incapable of bracing himself, crunching the bridge of his nose against the bucket's rim. They wasted no time fighting, running down the corridor, avoiding the batons. Through writhing halls of steel and dogflesh they ran, tumbling and springing back when their injuries stabbed them. Into a dining hall and out to the endless flats and fences of a playground. Janitor's closet, dead end. Up the stairs. Down the stairs? They arrived where they'd begun, facing down their captors. Their stun batons sparkled assurances of suffering. There was no telling the dogcatchers they'd come in peace, and she wouldn't have wanted to anyway. So she committed to scream before being knocked out.

VI

Keeping track of the days proved impossible. They were fed an identical gruel thrice daily. The rest of their time was spent lazing about the cell. She scratched her boredom on the floor, the grooves subsumed by countless previous occupants busying themselves with the same inanity. The only alternative to boredom was an unventilated heat so intense it let her feel nothing but fever. It would be more sound, tactically, to glue her eyes to the floor and play defeated when the staff came to feed her. But she could not. Her desire for the next thing burned brighter and hotter than the terror of summer.

As she was somewhat fed, her body regained a percentage of the musculature befitting her breed. Whatever that breed was, it was strong, mean. She might've been an escapee from the kind of dog owner that beats their pets in hopes they will replicate their abuse upon intruders. Or maybe a dogfighting ring. Her rib knit together in one wrong piece. The xoloitzcuintli mirrored her, transforming from rangy to lean and cruel.

Arbitrarily, they would be taken to the pound's esplanade. The floor was bare, the air dusty. Dogs loitered about in packs, or chased their own tails. One purebred terrier, a once-pedigreed specimen of the nameless breed that made her, tried to assert dominance. When she gouged his muzzle, their captors contracted the limits of their playing area to a barrens behind a fence.

Half a dozen dogs rotated in and out of the barrens before any noticed the hole she was digging. Hidden without much effort, it was big enough to fit half of her. In time, the tunnel would lead outside. Even the xoloitzcuintli had taken several days to realize she was planning an escape, and not simply following the canine instinct to plow holes. She was reminded again that she was not quite a dog, even if she had long given up on being human. But she could communicate well enough to rebuild a team. The xolo would tag in when she grew weary. The number of helping dogs grew to a dozen, then twenty. By the time the tunnel was halfway to completion, even a chihuahua had joined.

Several times they spotted their former pack wandering the lot, sometimes together, sometimes separate. The first few times she yelled for them, they approached and regarded her, the way one gazes at a relic in a museum and wonders, without much gravitas, what life would've been like had they been born millennia ago. Eventually, her barks combined into the background din of dogs they did not care for, and ceased responding altogether.

Soon the tunnel reached beyond the exterior fence. Another week of work, and they could secure a head start. But the pound stirred. Secretions of fear dominated the stench on the cell floor. She remembered the promised slaughter at the end of each month. They did not have time to plan ahead. Incapable of verbalizing, she caught herself hoping to lead by example. It was not a position, it was an imposition. She had accepted help from a score of the like-minded, and she was now responsible for them. Se groped at the limits of responsibility, trying to find where she ended and the other began, she who in life had not been responsible even for herself. She laid down and searched for the last time she had felt grateful, and couldn't find it before she fell asleep.

VII

They'd start with the sick. Next would be the unadoptables, the street mutts who'd been picked up only to be executed. Some of these she'd interacted with often enough to know by smell as she once knew men by name, like the terrier whose nose she'd scarred.

She chewed this urgency against the sour reminder that she now commanded a horde. When the world reintroduced itself to her as a punishment of meat and teeth, eschewing responsibility had been a necessity. Now it had returned with the gall to speak to her in human voice. As if she had not discarded mankind. As if, she admitted, mankind had not discarded her. She could not stomach to leave anyone behind, for that would be to replicate the crime man inflicted upon her; and she reasoned that she would look out for herself before anyone else, because she carried already such a weight of corpses, it would be disrespect to succumb under their burden.

The next day was to be their last. The ground smelled sweet with the dread of freedom. She could instigate disturbance, put herself in the first line of danger. Many would escape, even if she did not, and as she faded into the injection she could comfort herself by thinking of her legacy, spreading over the city's metallised veins. Or she could scarper unannounced, and she might be the only one to make it out alive, but it would be she who made it out. As she had learnt to do with all problems of the physical, she let her body decide.

The inside of the tunnel was cool, damp, guarded from summer by cavernous darkness. She cursed herself to hell for choosing the coward's way, even as every imprecation pushed her further away from sunlight. She tried to tell herself that the others had been foolish to offer service to her, and doubly so for failing to bolt, as she was doing, when given the chance. It did not work.

Something pulled her back from her freedom, away from sin and into the sunlight by a puncture in her leg. It was her old, tall packmate, whose mad barking she'd missed. She was surprised its bony complexion allowed it the strength to pull her out. The guards turned to face their battle, and she feared for her life.

The riot broke. Wailing, the borzoi lunged at the leg it'd injured. She stood, unshaken by the rumble of innumerable paws skirting and dodging around the guards' nets towards and towards the hole behind her, and raked its eye in response. Their borders melted. Skin and sensation became one, and beneath the madness of difference, they both wanted to be free, no matter what. She knew then without a doubt that she knew she must kill her packmate, without hesitation or delay.

The scarred terrier she'd fought with careened into her packmate's side and sent it sprawling away from a dogcatching net. Its wielder switched targets. Within moments, the terrier was tangled up, and she stared in horror at the mirror of her own form, writhing helpless against the wire.

She should help. She should offer her transgression to be atoned in the blood of the terrier's captor. But he was armed and armored, and no good could come of giving up escape. If the terrier had anything to say in the matter, even an exchanged glance, it was drowned by the impulse to fight its way out of the net.

Her packmate sped into the hole where many had gone already. The catcher's eyes followed. Word would spread, and the hole would be gone before the riot. For but a second, her sin of treachery had gone up in smoke; arrested and incomplete, it was no sin at all. But as she leapt at last into the hole and out of the pound, she knew herself twice the betrayer.

The pound's back met the parking lot of a bread-packing plant. Plastic and grime and sweat-soaked humans entered their cars and locked the doors, faced with the wave of escapees trotting unchained in all directions. What men the pound could spare wrestled with the dogs that hadn't already placed miles between themselves and the hole. The boulevards were not far. She willed herself to look after her safety first, but familiarity forced her attention towards one familiar yelp. Her packmate had been snuck on and wrapped into a net. A double-crosser not worth saving, but her own duplicity remained unpurged. She poised to attack.

T he black blur of the xoloitzcuintli barreled at the dogcatcher, knocking him over. The dogcatcher released the net with a cry. The xoloitzcuintli opted to drag it away and towards her, holding the net by the teeth. She made her way around and over to the mesh, which she tried to hold against their packmate's thrashing. The xoloitzcuintli maneuvered the pole into a spin. With some difficulty, she tightened the grip of her jaws as the xoloitzcuintli completed another spin - with a third, their packmate had squeezed through the gap in the net, free save for a leg.

Into the opposite direction, she and the xoloitzcuintli escaped. They rounded buildings, vehicles, families, uncaring and free. They kept going a good ways into the boulevard, playing at keeping up with random cars. The smell and sound of outdoors, trifling exchanges of car horns and workers stealing supplies upon being fired and gunshots, all were exhilarating. She drank deep of the Earth's wounds.

A strange howl snapped her out of her reverie. One catcher had chased them all this way. The xoloitzcuintli strigg;ed in the throes of the noose. She raced at the man and clamped down onto his calf. Still he would not let go of the noose. She climbed up his thigh and launched herself against his torso. The xoloitzcuintli landed on its fragile side, cry of pain minimized into a cough. A gap had formed in the space between its neck and the loop's string, enough for him to breathe and grapple against. Soon it'd break free.

The man'd had the breath knocked out of him. His eyes bulged. His head was not armored. Onlookers gawked at the spectacle, recording or calling for help or doing nothing at all. Perfect and unfettered she was as she opened her mouth.

No one knew how to intercede when she ripped the man's trachea free of his neck. They kept recording, or screamed more, or gasped in horror, paralyzed in the act they were already caught in. She spat the ruined throat upwards, painting crimson like summer fireworks, or gunshots.

VIII

She awoke to find a yellowed set of fangs bared at her, the mouth of the xolo whose life she'd saved. Her attempts at shaking it off were futile. But if it remained so stubbornly stuck to her, that meant it was at her mercy as well. She spun her weight from one leg to the other, until they both fell. It released her shoulder with a yelp to nurse his bad side. Bitten, she roared alive and charged. They rammed into the monument's broad side, her head leading the way.

Something hot dribbled down her forehead. Her body would not respond. The xolo barged against her flank, attempting to reinjure her healed rib. It held, for now. It would not hold much longer. A self-piteous patina settled over her eyes. She did not want to die here, after this much struggling.

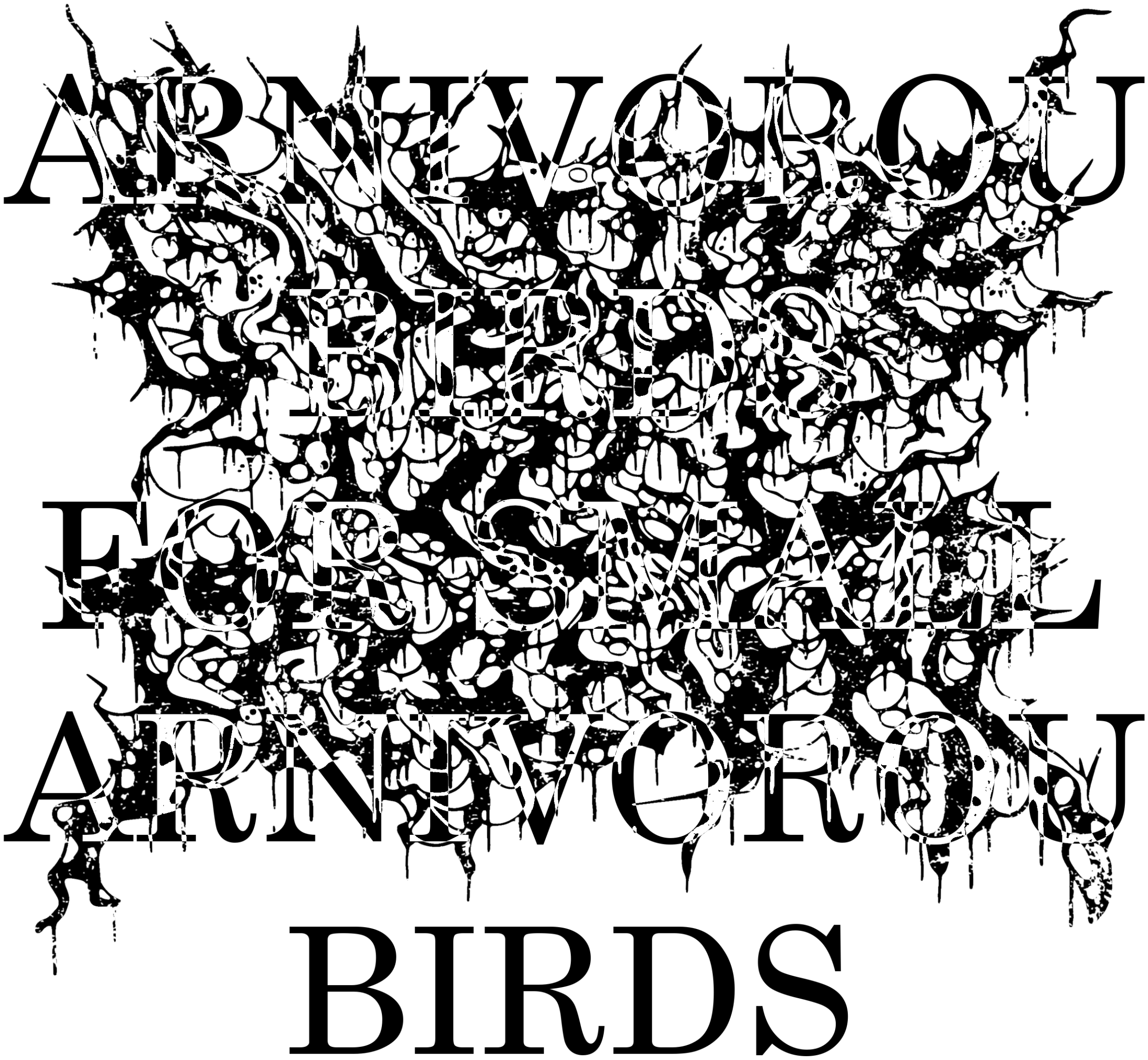
An immense bellow emanated from her throat. She faltered, still wobbly, and the xolo punctured her back. She sunk her teeth into the throat left exposed in eagerness. It replied with a desolate wail, gurgling bubbles of blood. It had power still left to respond with his own bite to her loin, just enough to reach the muscle and send a spasm down her back. But not enough to kill. It fell into the ocean that bled from its jugular. Repeatedly, it wandered upwards only to slip again. Each time it rose less, each time it fell for longer, until the dance of death throes had played to its end.

She held the xoloitzcuintli's eye, watching the curtains of death close. This carcass was warm, and familiar, and fresh. She took into her mouth all her names of violence: suicide and survivor, murderer and cannibal.

We are the wild dogs
Wild dogs
Wild dogs

Wild dogs
Wild dogs
Wild dogs
-Toxic Holocaust, "Wild Dogs"

BY SMALL
CARNIVOROUS
BIRDS
FOR SMALL
CARNIVOROUS
BIRDS



Julia Norza is a standard tile improvement. She is used to supply Power to the city from a renewable source. Julia is the second renewable Power supplier and the most powerful among the Power-supplying tile improvements. She may only be constructed on a special terrain feature: the Geothermal Fissure. These are quite rare, and are usually found next to Mountains, Volcanoes, and near continent splits.

Lead and sole editress.
Responsible for:
"The John Wick..."
"Punishment in Flesh"

Nillin Rae Melodie weighs approximately 7 oz. and is 15 cm long. Despite its diminutive size, it can deal an average of 3000 to 4000 damage per turn using its library of nasty curses. Nillin can be recruited in the Crone's Forest and surrounding locations, though the Hag Cliffs provide optimal spawn rates. It is weak to Room Temperature and Every-type damage. Most of its attacks apply weird or normal status effects, so be sure to have Cleansing Soap on hand. It drops Tuna Melt on death, and is thus critically endangered.

Culture Hell Forever logo designer.

Ruby Solaris Melodie is primarily transmitted via e-mail, appearing as a transmission error, with subject lines including "Error", "Mail Delivery System", "Test" or "Mail Transaction Failed" in different languages, including English and French. The mail contains an attachment that, if executed, resends the rabbit to e-mail addresses found in local files such as a user's address book. It also copies itself to the "shared folder" of peer-to-peer file sharing application Kazaa in an attempt to spread that way.

Shrike Zone webmaster and online zine host.

Natalie Terezi Rei Watts fell in a hole.

Cover artist.

jackie clam romanticizes, sexualizes, and normalizes. it thinks efurrything it writes is "normal fur girls" and endorses efurrything it depicts.

Responsible fur:
"Sympathetic Signal Projector"

Pochapal didn't come from online, but I want you to believe that if it makes you feel better. Pochapal intersects with the material when the feeling of Being Too Late no longer suffices, and subsides off the metaphysical eggshell of the something you do not believe you should fear. There have been at most three verifiable Pochapal "sightings" this century. Prolonged exposure to Pochapal-derived narratology induces a moderate sensation of [GRATITUDE / SIMULACRA / RECURSIVE SPECTRAL SELFHOOD POSSESSION]. Most encounters are benign and thoroughly survivable, even for you. No guaranteed Pochapal summoning rituals exist at the time of this publication.

Responsible for:
"backwash exegesis"

Peter Noble's 1956 biography describes Orson Welles as "a magnificent figure of a man, over six feet tall, handsome, with flashing eyes and a gloriously resonant speaking-voice". Welles said that a voice specialist once told him he was born to be a heldentenor, a heroic tenor, but that when he was young and working at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, he forced his voice down into a bass-baritone. Even as a baby, Welles was prone to illness, including diphtheria, measles, whooping cough, and malaria.

Responsible for:
"The John Wick..."
"YouTube Is Where The Poop Is"
"Anyone Else Notice This?

Iris T. N. is a hilariously incomplete assemblage of qualia, and its opinion is law. Those looking for a comprehensive body of work can follow her to the ends of the earth.

Responsible for:
"Suffer No Imitation"

Previously on MAGICAL GIRL GLEAMING MOONLIGHT: Ditzy broad Ashlynn Harley was hit by a stray cosmic beam and granted the power to transform into a cute costume on command. When she's not out saving the galaxy from the malice dimension, or whatever, she spends most of her time lying in bed thinking about girls, and wondering how to get bloodstains off of clothes that disappear when you take them off.

Responsible for:
"U Think Ur Clever"

Tulips is a communist misanthrope infohazard taking the form of a heat-seeking missile. It's questionable as to whether she exists in any traditional sense, the incoherence failing to manifest anything of note. But the missile-form goes on. The missile will always find you, regardless of whether you want it to. It's impossible to repel it. It's impossible to distract it. Run.

You can find more of her stuff of questionable relevance at tulips.gay/ and wordsmith.social/arbiter.

Responsible for:
"Take Fucking Whatever"

Valerie Serac is an ancient historian by training, forklift certified factory worker by trade, and competitive Warhammer 40k player-painter by aspiration

Responsible for:
"Roma, Roma"